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## Teacher Efficacy in Implementing Social and Emotional Learning: A Convergent Mixed Methods Study

Wendy Barr Holmes

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Teacher Efficacy in Implementing Social and Emotional Learning:  
A Convergent Mixed Methods Study

by

Wendy Barr Holmes

Bachelor of Arts  
Furman University, 1999

Bachelor of Science  
Furman University, 1999

Master of Education  
Converse College, 2007

Master of Education  
Winthrop University, 2010

---

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Accepted by:

Suha Tamim, Major Professor

Chris Bogiages, Committee Member

Terrance McAdoo, Committee Member

Suzy Hardie, Committee Member

Linda Silvernail, Committee Member

Tracey L. Weldon, Interim Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe teachers' perceived self-efficacy and related experiences in implementing a state-mandated Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) program during a global pandemic. Program implementation was initiated at the start of the 2020-2021 school year, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent extended school closures. Research questions included: 1) How do teachers perceive their sense of efficacy in implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic? and 2) What are the experiences of teachers implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic? Participants included nine middle school teachers who taught daily SEL lessons to their students. This study employed convergent mixed methods, where data were collected from a quantitative survey, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. Data analysis and triangulation were conducted to reach the following conclusions: Despite feeling stressed and anxious about returning to the new school year, teachers felt an above average sense of efficacy with teaching SEL. Teachers felt least able to influence the ongoing design of the program. They also agreed that more comprehensive training was needed when the program was introduced. An action plan contained the following next steps: comprehensive teacher training, expansion of the SEL curriculum, increased classroom observations, opportunities for teachers and students to provide ongoing feedback, and considerations for implementation of a similar SEL program for teachers.

Keywords: self-efficacy, social and emotional learning (SEL), teacher efficacy

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

History credits SARS, MERS, Swine Flu, and Ebola as recent examples of viral outbreaks that have generated public fear, panic, and decisive school closures in pockets across the world; however, none have compelled fear, panic, and school closures in the United States to the extent of the COVID-19 pandemic (Azevedo et al., 2020; Masuda & Strong, 2020; “Pandemics,” 2020; Soma, 2020). By March of 2020, the COVID-19 virus had taken three months to spread to 144 countries, infecting over 118,000 people worldwide (“Pandemics,” 2020). Time would reveal that its spread would amplify, particularly in the United States. Soon after its emergence, U.S. state and local leaders announced that schools would be closed to help slow the country’s rapidly increasing COVID-19 cases. South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster followed suit and declared that all school buildings would close for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year (Daprile, 2020; Feit et al., 2020). Consequently, Spain County (pseudonym) students and staff were forced into quarantine. This required teachers to provide online instruction to their at-home students for the remainder of the school year.

In July of 2020, Governor McMaster implored the Department of Education to require all South Carolina students to physically return to the first day of the 2020-2021 school year, citing his concern with “the impact of isolation and uncertainty on the mental health and emotional stability of the children” (Gilreath, 2020). The CDC (2019) confirms that extended school closures are harmful to students, leading to loss of learning



and social connection, while impairing their mental health and well-being. Felder confirmed that students from low-income households would miss learning during the school closures, and any situations involving abuse and neglect could go unreported (as cited in Street, 2020). In June of 2020, maintaining contact with students during the closure was identified as a statewide challenge, as State Superintendent Molly Spearman quoted over 15,000 South Carolina students were classified as absentee or unreachable while schools were closed. According to Charleston County Superintendent Gerrita Postlewait, these unreachable students were “most vulnerable and need public schools, [yet they] were more likely not to be engaged” (as cited in Street, 2020, para. 8).

In response to these concerns, the South Carolina Department of Education developed a plan for students’ physical return and declared an immediate need to provide Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as a layer of support embedded into instructional curriculum in every classroom in South Carolina. Spain County responded to this mandate by requiring each of its schools to establish an SEL team, tasked with designing an SEL program focused on helping students to overcome pandemic-related trauma and other personal challenges related to the 2019-2020 school closure.

At the start of the 2020-2021 school year, Spain County schools publicly grappled with the continued spread of the COVID-19 virus and its implications for health and safety when schools reopened (Masuda, 2020; Roberts, 2020). A high priority for district leaders was the ability to effectively implement CDC guidelines and reinforce uniform procedures within every school. Many Spain County teachers publicly shared concerns regarding their eventual return to “brick and mortar” instruction (Masuda, 2020, Roberts, 2020). In Spain County, “brick and mortar” was a term coined to refer any activity taking

place within the school building. Special school board meetings were conducted, where district leaders weighed the best interests of instruction and learning against the best interests of health and safety for students and staff. The district decided on a contingency plan to employ one of three instructional models – teaching hybrid (2 days face-to-face, 3 days at-home online), virtual (5 days at-home online), or traditional (5 days face-to-face). Spain County began the 2020-2021 school year in a hybrid model, with no intention to change to a traditional model until COVID-19 cases in Spain County were low enough for students to return to a traditional model (Masuda, 2020, Roberts, 2020). District-led teacher preparation to provide daily instruction in the hybrid instructional model was brisk and streamlined. School administrators were given limited time to deliver professional development that would adequately equip teachers to effectively deliver instruction.

The first workdays for teachers and staff proved unsettling for some and unpredictable for most. Faculty members worried about protecting their personal health and the health of their loved ones upon re-entering an environment where the potential for the spread of COVID-19 was ever-present. Uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of wearing masks and remaining socially distanced from students and colleagues loomed in schools across the county; however, teachers generally responded to change as they typically do – by monitoring and adjusting (Masuda, 2020; G. Smith, personal communication, December 17, 2020).

### **Problem of Practice**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought distinct stressors to the lives of families, students, and staff in Spain County schools. Teacher stressors at Winston Middle School

(pseudonym) included uncertainties about their health, personal safety, job security, and the possibility of contracting the virus and exposing it to vulnerable family members. These concerns were prevalent, as were questions about how to successfully deliver hybrid instruction in a restricted environment, with decreased physical interaction and limited opportunities for face-to-face instruction (Masuda, 2020; Roberts, 2020; G. Smith, personal communication, December 17, 2020). A teacher shared,

When school started, we were trying to figure out that hybrid model...I remember sitting in there and I know there were four or five different teachers that I had to just stand and talk to about [it]...it took us forever to figure out.

To further compound this challenge, every classroom teacher was mandated an additional instructional expectation - teaching SEL.

As a school administrator, I worked alongside Ms. Browning, our school's behavioral specialist, to facilitate the implementation of our school's SEL program. Whereas numerous SEL programs have been effectively implemented in schools prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Durlak et al., 2011; Tate, 2019; Weissberg, 2016), I acknowledged that the conditions under which this school year began presented the following challenges related to successful implementation:

- 1) initial lack of teacher training/preparation to deliver SEL instruction.
- 2) requiring teachers to receive ongoing SEL training as they deliver SEL instruction.
- 3) requiring teachers to deliver SEL instruction in addition to adapting to the hybrid model of instruction.

4) requiring effective program implementation amid health and safety-related stressors.

Our teachers' potential inability to surmount the above-mentioned challenges would result in ineffective implementation of SEL. This result could produce varied consequences for students. Failure to overcome the effects of extended school closure due to a pandemic could result in effects that damage or delay students' social and emotional well-being (Baron et al., 2020; Lee, 2020; Soma, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). An additional negative outcome included students losing almost a year of quality instruction due to school closures, putting millions of students at risk of dropping out of school (Azevedo, 2020; Horesh & Brown, 2020).

### **Theoretical Framework**

A strong sense of efficacy will empower a teacher to foster students' social and emotional well-being through teaching SEL. Teacher efficacy is derived from Bandura's social learning (cognitive) theory, which asserts that a person's self-beliefs strongly influence the level of control they employ in completing a given task. Bandura further defines self-efficacy as a measure of a person's belief in his/her ability to control outcomes in relation to reaching personal goals (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986). SEL is a construct that aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. This conceptual structure prioritizes meeting basic and advanced needs, which ultimately enables people to seek higher levels of fulfillment (Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1954). Maslow's work is derived from motivational theory, which suggests that specific needs and/or incentives drive human behavior (Maslow, 1943). These overarching theories (social learning theory and motivational theory) provide a theoretical framework for the pursuit of this study.

## **Purpose of Study**

This convergent mixed methods study describes teachers' perceived sense of efficacy and their related experiences in implementing a state mandated SEL program during a global pandemic. SEL programs are administered in schools to help children and adults become more skilled in managing emotions, accomplishing goals, maintaining positive relationships, and making responsible decisions ( Collaborative for Academic, Social, And Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021; "What is Social-Emotional Learning," 2019).

## **Research Questions**

This study answers the following research questions:

1. How do teachers perceive their sense of efficacy in implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?
2. What are the experiences of teachers implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?

In this study, I explore teachers' perceptions of their efficacy as they deliver daily SEL instruction to their students. I also document their experiences as implementers of our SEL program. The implementation of this program was initiated in the August of 2020, at the start of the school year, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study intervention began in December of 2020, three months after implementation began.

## **Rationale and Significance of the Study**

Studies and meta-analyses reveal the implementation of numerous SEL programs that resulted in increased student achievement and efficacy in the classroom in schools around the world. The results consistently show that an infusion of SEL into classroom

instruction renders positive results for both students and teachers by increasing student achievement, enhancing relationships, improving efficacy, and decreasing negative outcomes (Collaborative for Academic, Social, And Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021; Durlak et al., 2011; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; “What is Social-Emotional Learning,” 2019). SEL has become increasingly more prevalent in schools across the country where more and more students are the victims of trauma related to bullying, abuse, violence, and other stressors (Tate, 2019; Weissberg, 2016). School leaders have identified the need to provide social-emotional support for all students, to assist them with navigating personal challenges.

Van Lucker and Parolin (2020) predict that recent school closures will widen learning opportunities between children from lower income families and higher income families. They attribute this divide to the contrast in home conditions. Students from lower-income families more often have working single-parents who are not at home to supervise their children during school closures. Consequently, these students remain in unstructured environments where they struggle to complete homework and maintain online contact with their teachers. Other income-related factors, including limited access to healthy meals, quality health care, and at-home Internet contribute to these students’ regression in learning during school closures. This phenomenon represents inequity in education, a problem that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but was exacerbated due to recent school closures (Azevedo et al., 2020; Eyles et al., 2020; Gross & Opalka, 2020; Horesh & Brown, 2020; Lee, 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). In the 2020-2021 school year 82% of WMS students were identified as students in poverty. These WMS families experienced financial challenges at a rate

higher than families in other middle schools across the district. Our students' limited access to educational opportunities outside the school environment further warrants additional support on a daily basis. The successful implementation of SEL at WMS was particularly consequential in addressing learning opportunities that emerged due to extended school closures.

This study is significant to educational research because it offers critical knowledge that is timely and applicable to a monumental occurrence in educational history. It informs the practices of school leaders who institute SEL programs that support students and staff during and in the aftermath of a global pandemic. The timeliness of this study is fitting, as students and staff across the world began the 2020-2021 school year under constrained conditions directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The steps taken in this study occurred in response to what has likely been the most immediate and pertinent challenge presented to every school leader charged with ensuring the safety and well-being of students and staff.

The documented implementation of an SEL program during a global pandemic is paramount to maintaining the social and emotional health of students who have experienced the effects of extended school closures. This study most immediately informs the WMS administration and staff and Spain County leaders tasked with monitoring SEL implementation. Teacher reflections of their perceived sense of efficacy in the program's implementation and their shared experiences as SEL instructors and will directly inform its ongoing development. Its results can potentially inform schools across the state of South Carolina, and the educational research community.

## **Research Design**

This study is grounded in action research, as it addresses the immediate needs of a specific group in a unique setting in which the study was implemented (Herr and Anderson, 2015). It was conducted with a pragmatic research approach, allowing for the most appropriate methods to be employed to answer the research questions posed (Creswell, 2015). This study implemented a convergent mixed methods design, allowing for the collection of quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview/observation) data to answer the study's research questions (Creswell, 2015). Quantitative data was collected from a teacher efficacy survey completed by 36 volunteer teachers. This data was compiled into frequency data and analyzed in order to answer research question #1. Qualitative data was collected from nine semi-structured teacher interviews and two rounds of classroom observations. This data was compiled and coded to produce themes and sub-themes in order to answer research question #2. The data retrieved from these methods were triangulated by comparing and contrasting the results from the surveys, interviews and observations. This triangulation of data allowed for an interpretation of the findings in order to propose new knowledge and further inform the study.

## **Positionality**

Efron and Ravid (2013) encourage researchers to consider their own awareness within a study, including their own "values, worldview, and life experience" in relation to the decisions made and actions taken to conduct the research (p. 57). As an educator, I believe that all students can learn, and that teachers work daily on the frontlines to ensure that students receive the best education possible. I believe that my job as an administrator is to support teachers in these efforts by providing the tools necessary to educate our



students. In this study, I fulfill this duty by facilitating the implementation of our SEL program.

As an administrator facilitating the implementation of our school's SEL program, my positionality within this study is best described as outsider in collaboration with insiders (Herr & Anderson, 2015). In conjunction with Ms. Browning, our school's behavior interventionist, I assisted with presenting the SEL curriculum to a core group of teachers who were responsible for training their peers to teach the content. I describe my positionality within this study as outsider in collaboration with other insiders, to the extent that I worked alongside Ms. Browning to facilitate the design of our SEL program and then "train the trainers" to teach the content to their colleagues. Upon releasing the training content to the teacher trainers, my role in the intervention was advisory and observational in nature. I recognize that as a school leader in my building, my position of authority comes with potential limitations regarding my access to teacher experiences and perspectives. It was essential that our participants (who were teachers) could be honest and objective with their input, with no concern for reprimand if they provided responses that reflected negatively upon the SEL program. I focused on communicating our students' need for SEL due to the school closures alongside the mandate given by our governor to ensure its implementation in our building. My intention was for all participants to feel like contributors to a process in which they assumed a willing role.

I value the formidable roles that teachers assume in educating young people and understand the need to ensure teacher well-being. While many of the teachers in our building were also parents of students who attend school within our district, I acknowledge that I am not a parent. I do not proclaim to know the role of a parent in

general, nor specifically in this school environment where teachers and parents were making difficult decisions regarding how to best provide for their children's education amid a global pandemic. The content of my conversations with teachers throughout this study were decisive in portraying my positionality as researcher. It was paramount that my interactions demonstrated integrity, authenticity, and objectivity to quell any misconceptions regarding my intentions while operating in a supervisory role.

I am an able-bodied, African American female who grew up in a middle-class family in the same city where our school is located. My ties to surrounding families and communities are extensive, and they bolster my commitment to serving our school. Our students are the children of many people whom I have known since childhood. I have also served as an administrator in two Title I middle schools - both in the same school district - for almost seven years. My intent was to be able to draw from my familiarity with the needs of WMS families, coupled with my understanding of the ongoing needs of students in a Title I school setting in order to facilitate the implementation of our SEL program.

### **Limitations**

In any research study, it is important to acknowledge the limitations that may influence the interpretations of the results and findings. These limitations may include constraints on the study's setting, sample, timing, collection of data, and analysis of data (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

Because this study employed action research, the setting and sample of participants were limited to WMS. The practices and procedures described in this study were particular to our school and therefore not generalizable to other schools or SEL

programs. A distinct limitation related to this study's efficacy-related findings was the number of teachers who participated in the study. There were 36 out of 60 teachers who agreed to submit survey responses, and nine out of those 36 gave interview responses. These findings do not account for the remaining 24 teachers who elected not to participate in the study at all. For this reason, the results of the study do not reflect the entire teaching staff. They reflect the efficacy of those who participated in the surveys and the related experiences of those who participated in the interviews.

An additional limitation was reflected in the timing of the intervention versus the timing of data collection. Whereas we began implementation of SEL in early September of 2020, data collection did not occur until mid-October, December, and January of 2021. This passage of time prior to data collection reflects teachers potentially demonstrating more familiarity with the program than if data was collected immediately following initial implementation.

Another limitation related to the timing of events involves changes that occurred in our instructional model after Winter break. Whereas our school continued to follow the hybrid model prior to dismissing for Winter break, we returned from Winter break in a fully virtual model. For the first two weeks in January of 2021, our teachers reported to school and provided online instruction to our students, who remained at home. Students joined Google Meets with their teachers each day to receive academic instruction during this time. SEL instruction was provided in Google Meets during non-academic Explore classes (i.e. Chorus, Art, P.E., Keyboarding etc.). These changes in the schedule and instructional model changed the way teachers and students engaged with SEL before we

returned to the hybrid model employed prior to Winter break. Final classroom observations were conducted when teachers and students returned to the hybrid model.

Finally, a limitation related to teacher buy-in involves the mandated directive from which our SEL program originated. Because the state required that every school implement SEL prior to the start of the 2020-2021 school year, this may have influenced our teachers' openness to implementing the program. Most teachers were not given the opportunity to contribute to the initial design and organization of our SEL curriculum, and none were allowed to opt out of implementation. This may have caused teachers to have negative bias against the program.

## **Summary**

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to negatively impact multiple aspects of the 2020-2021 school year. Extended school closures caused students to endure challenges related to their academic, social, and emotional well-being. Upon returning to school, teachers modified their instructional practices and assumed additional responsibilities (including SEL instruction) that potentially threatened their sense of efficacy as classroom teachers. This study provided an intervention through a schoolwide implementation of an SEL program to address student needs. This study also provided opportunities for teachers to describe their perceived sense of efficacy and related experiences as implementers of our SEL program.

The current chapter provided an introduction, problem of practice, theoretical framework, purpose, significance, rationale, research design, positionality and limitations related to this study. Chapter 2 presents a literature review, where a historical framework and a more in-depth theoretical framework are provided. Chapter 3 describes the

methodology employed in this study. Chapter 4 discusses this study's results and findings. Chapter 5 summarizes this study with further discussion, implications, and recommendations.

### **Glossary of Terms**

***Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)***: Curriculum that equips students and adults to maintain cooperative relationships, make responsible decisions, manage strong emotions, communicate clearly and assertively, solve problems effectively, recognize emotions in self and others, and demonstrate empathy for others (“What is Social”, 2019).

***Self-Efficacy***: A person's beliefs in his/her abilities to complete a task to produce desired results (Bandura, 1997).

***Teacher Efficacy***: A teacher's perception of his or her ability to deliver desired student outcomes, even among difficult or unmotivated students (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, 1997).

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

In response to the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, extended school closures became a common reaction for school districts around the world. This eventually resulted in more than 1 billion students completing school assignments at home for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year (Azevedo et al., 2020; Lee, 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). This unprecedented circumstance “[left] us wondering how, even the temporary loss of the physical [and] social setting...is impacting learning and life for middle schoolers” (Smith & Falbe 2020, p. 3). Extended school closures have only exacerbated existing inequities that hinder disadvantaged populations from access to school resources (Azevedo et al., 2020; Eyles et al., 2020; Gross & Opalka, 2020; Horesh & Brown, 2020; Lee, 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

Research revealed that the negative impacts were both immediate and far-reaching. Regarding student achievement, performance measures indicated a decline in learning outcomes and a subsequent loss of months/years of normal academic growth (Azevedo et al., 2020; Eyles et al., 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Students with disabilities fared worse, as schools struggled to provide appropriate academic and behavioral support in a virtual environment. Students with disabilities are supported by Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) that provide services to support their mental and behavioral needs. Eighty percent of these students rely on their schools to provide these services (Azevedo et al., 2020; Eyles et al., 2020; Gross & Opalka, 2020; Horesh &

Brown, 2020; Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; Lee, 2020). Students from low-income families were also at a higher disadvantage, as their socio-economic status often limited their access to essential resources such as food, parental supervision, and online access for daily instruction. Another group of students at a significant disadvantage during school closures were English Language Learners, whose families struggled with school-home communication in any given school year. Language barriers continue to be a common challenge for these families, who often are also low-income families (Gross & Opalka, 2020).

Students' physical well-being became a concern, as stay-at-home orders allowed for sedentary behaviors and limited physical activity. This issue was compounded by families' limited access to school-based healthcare services and loss of health insurance due to loss of jobs (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020). An issue related to student well-being was the prospect of increased cases of child abuse and neglect during the school closure, whereas schools provide a haven of protection for child victims and an opportunity for school personnel to observe signs and report abuse (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; Baron et al., 2020; Lee, 2020). The effects of poverty and child neglect typically lead to inconsistent or non-existent communication between schools and families, resulting in insufficient student support. The long-term effects of these deficiencies include an increase in grade level retention and student dropout rates, and a subsequent decrease in potential for adult employment and earning capacity (Azevedo et al., 2020; Eyles et al., 2020). These pandemic-related challenges represent inequities in education for students in the above-mentioned underrepresented groups. This study implemented SEL as a

means of mitigating similar challenges that would potentially emerge among WMS students during the school closures.

Teachers around the world also endured the negative effects of extended school closures during this time. With little forewarning, they were thrust into an unfamiliar world of online instruction via distance/virtual learning. Uncertain about their new roles in this environment, they became students of online teaching (Nasr, 2020; “Three Principles,” 2020). Nasr (2020) noted that “regardless of comfort level, teachers had no choice but to plunge head-first into the pool of technology” (p. 169). Sudden adaptation to this new teaching environment posed new challenges, including leading online class meetings, delivering effective online instruction, providing virtual IEP accommodations, and holding students accountable for work completion.

Teachers and students underwent multiple stressors during the school closure. For many, the long-term isolation in unstructured home environments exacerbated bouts of loneliness and depression, which suggested further difficulty upon returning to the new school year (Kaden, 2020). These challenges emerged alongside common sources of stress due to the daily-increasing death toll and other stressors communicated by the CDC. Smith, a middle school educator, described her stressors as “(1) fear and worry about your own health and the health of your loved ones, (2) changes in sleep or eating patterns, and (3) difficulty sleeping or concentrating” She confirmed the impact of these stressors, stating that she had marginal concentration, “interrupted by running thoughts...about my health and the health of my loved ones” (2020, p. 4).

In the 2020-2021 school year, teachers at WMS were introduced to distance/virtual learning models that required changes in school schedules, procedures,



and routines. Teachers, students and families struggled to adapt. All parties were navigating an instructional plan that none had experienced before, accompanied by stress, anxiety, and uncertainty. In these virtual or hybrid instructional models, teachers and students were scheduled to either physically attend school a few days each week or not at all. Teachers were required to meet virtually with students to conduct online instruction from school or home, and students were required to complete and submit digital assignments, often in isolation at home.

Since the emergence of COVID-19, student and teacher challenges have compounded. In this challenging environment, research indicates that teachers who maintain a strong sense of efficacy will thrive more often than those who do not. In correlation, students who receive ongoing support in the form of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) will experience more academic success than those who do not (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

This study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do teachers perceive their sense of efficacy in implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?
- 2) What are the experiences of teachers implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to describe teachers' perceived sense of efficacy and their related experiences in implementing a state mandated SEL program during a global pandemic. SEL programs are administered in the school setting to provide ongoing opportunities for children and adults to become more skilled in managing

emotions, accomplishing goals, maintaining positive relationships, and making responsible decisions (“What is social,” 2019; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL] 2021). This study explores teachers’ perceptions of their efficacy as SEL instructors. It also documents their experiences as implementers of the SEL program.

In subsequent sections of this chapter, I identify the research procedures that I followed to conduct the literature review, including the types of sources that I gathered. This is followed by a historical background of teacher efficacy and SEL to highlight pivotal works and their authors who significantly contributed to the evolution of each construct. Subsequent elaboration on teacher efficacy and SEL as independent constructs follow. This chapter then provides a theoretical framework to present social learning theory and motivational theory as overarching themes from which teacher efficacy and SEL derive. A section that relates additional studies to my research follows. A summary of the literature review ends this chapter.

This literature review provides a synthesis and analysis of journal articles, books, and related research to demonstrate my understanding of the current research related to teacher efficacy and SEL. It informs the direction of my chosen methodology and the subsequent discussion of the results of my study. The pivotal works that I reference in this review establish a theoretical framework from which additional writings and subsequent researchers derive. Related research studies were reviewed to compare the elements of my research approach with those of similar studies. Current events and statistical data were compiled from news articles and statistical reports to validate this study’s problem of practice and rationale. To collect the literature for this review, I used

Google Scholar, ERIC, EBSCO, and the University of South Carolina Library. Keywords included to “teacher efficacy,” “social and emotional learning,” “motivational theory,” and “social learning theory.” I skimmed the abstracts and results of relevant studies and compiled those articles into a spreadsheet for later review. I then read the references of my compiled articles to repeat this process with additional relevant material. In cases where works were repeatedly referenced in multiple articles, I prioritized their review and pinpointed them as potential pivotal works. Upon compiling a comprehensive list of pivotal works, I created a timeline of their publication to support the historical framework of this literature review. I then sifted through the remaining content and eliminated those least relevant to the aim of my study. This approach provided an abundance of sources that revealed data, concepts, and quotations to substantiate this literature review. Whereas a literature review is cyclical in nature, it is understood that there is always more literature available to augment what has been compiled in this chapter (Machi & McEvoy, 2016).

### **Historical Perspectives**

To further understand teacher efficacy and SEL as they relate to this study, it is necessary to identify their respective theoretical sources and provide historical context. The following is a historical outline of influential theorists, authors, works and events that precede the problem of practice of the current study.

The teacher efficacy construct is derived from Bandura’s self-efficacy, which originated in social learning theory (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986). The early 1960s produced three important works related to social learning theory. In 1961, Bandura, Ross and Ross conducted their Bobo doll experiment, where they determined that children are

capable of learning through observation and emulation of adult behavior (i.e. learning through social observation). In 1963, Bandura and Walters introduced operant learning (a response to receiving an assured reward or punishment) and observational learning (a response to observing the transfer of a reward or punishment). In related research, Rotter (1966) drew conclusions about the connection between rewards and contingent behavior. These studies established correlations between student motivation and student learning.

In his *Social Learning Theory*, Bandura (1971) identified stimulus, response, environment, and observation as interrelated factors that impact learning. He concluded that learning requires stimulation from the environment, from human observation, and from human response. Learning occurs through the processing of these outcomes. Bandura coined the term self-efficacy in 1977, where he wrote that a person's expectancy to complete a task is highly influenced by psychological experiences (stimulation) related to coping, effort expenditure, and adversity sustainability. Bandura's *Social Foundation of Thought and Action* (1986) introduced his shift from social learning theory to social cognitive theory, which prioritized internal processing (cognition) over external influences (behaviorism).

Bandura expanded his research in self-efficacy in the late 1990s, where he further substantiated that self-efficacy is determined through mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and physiological state. In his *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, Bandura discussed teacher efficacy as well as student efficacy. He devised and published a teacher efficacy scale as a means of determining teachers' perceived efficacy in their professional capacity (1997). Subsequently, the challenge of developing a valid and reliable instrument to measure teacher efficacy became the work of many noted

scholars (Tschannen-Moran et al, 1998; Tschannen-Moran et al, 2001; Brackett et al., 2012). Teacher efficacy continued to be a prioritized study in the new millennium, as evidenced in several studies conducted by Jennings et al. (2009; 2011; 2014; 2017), who were strong proponents of the Prosocial Classroom model. This model promotes a teacher's social and emotional development in order to enhance teacher efficacy in the classroom (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Most recently, scholars have contributed literature focused on teacher efficacy in response to COVID-19 and its negative effects on classroom instruction. Haverback (2020) wrote, "Before, a seasoned teacher felt confident in their ability to teach. Now, this confidence may in question" (p. 1). In response, she recommended the strategic employment of Bandura's strands of self-efficacy (mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological/affective states) to improve instruction in this modified learning environment.

This study presents SEL with a foundation in motivational theory. Maslow's hierarchy of needs provided an original framework and justification for meeting student needs through the provision of SEL. The related concept of "character education" first appeared in U.S. classrooms in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (Cotton, 1777). Horace Mann emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as an avid proponent of values-based moral education, in response to students' ongoing exposure to poverty, crime, and social indecency (1849). This early example of SEL provided a stringent compass for guiding students' mental responses to traumatic exposure.

Character education in the mid-1900s was represented by Piaget and Kohlberg's work in cognitive developmental theory of moral education and development. Their

theory rejected moral education, due to its values-centered approach. Like Bandura, Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1984) prioritized cognitive processing to drive character development. Their contribution to SEL entailed a focus on human reasoning to make moral decisions. These decisions were influenced by societal laws and social and cultural norms, as opposed to moral education or values-based judgements (McLeod, 2015; Piaget, 1932). The 1990s saw a surge in character education as a priority in the Clinton and Bush administrations. The six pillars of this initiative included trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. (Character Counts, 2021). These virtues most closely resemble standards associated with SEL as it is presently defined. A bridge between character education and social and emotional learning was formed when both CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, And Emotional Learning) and the term “social and emotional learning” emerged from a meeting in 1994 hosted by the Fetzer Institute. Meeting attendees included researchers, educators, and child advocates involved in various education-based efforts to promote positive social and emotional development in children. They assembled to address a concern about ineffective school programming and a lack of coordination among character education programs at the school level (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021). CASEL experts have since published a significant number of books, articles, and research studies that promote the implementation of SEL to augment academic learning in K-12 classrooms. In 2002, Illinois became the first state to include SEL as an essential component of their statewide learning standards. Since then, there is continued effort to systematically infuse SEL into school districts across the country, specifically in large

urban areas (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bandura's work in social cognitive theory and Maslow's theory of human motivation comprise the theoretical framework that guides this study.

#### ***Social Cognitive Theory***

Social cognitive theory is a derivative of social learning theory, which credits social interaction as a determinant for: 1) providing human stimulus and response and 2) shaping human personality (Bandura, 1971; Miller & Dollard, 1941; Rotter, 1954).

Bandura and Walters (1963) expanded on this theory to include discussion on observational learning and vicarious reinforcement. Bandura later added self-efficacy as an essential element, subsequently establishing social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 2002).

Social cognitive theory is grounded in the premise that people are proactively involved in their own experiences and can affect desired results, based on their understanding of each experience. It promotes the idea that a person's self-beliefs highly influence the level of control that they employ in a situation (Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 2002). According to Bandura, "what people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave" (Bandura, 1986, p. 25). Bandura further argued that while a person's environmental challenges (i.e health, education, finances, etc.) may affect his outlook, they do not predicate his outcome (Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 2002). At the core of social cognitive theory are five basic human capabilities: symbolizing, forethought, vicarious learning, self-regulation, and self-reflection. These capabilities reinforce human cognition

as a guiding force in making decisions and choosing outcomes. Bandura identified cognition, behavior, and other personal/environmental factors that mutually interchange as contributors to understanding human functioning. His eventual distinction of a “cognitive” theory from the previous “learning” theory was triggered by his desire “to emphasize that cognition plays a critical role in people's capability to construct reality, self-regulate, encode information, and perform behaviors” (Bandura, 1977, p. 27). Bandura believed cognition impacted behavior more so than personal or environmental factors. This belief countered behaviorist notions that human functioning was more significantly influenced by external stimuli (environment) than mental processing (cognition) (Bandura, 1977, Bandura, 1986).

***Self-Efficacy.*** Social cognitive theory introduces self-efficacy as a deriving construct. Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3) and “self-belief in one’s capabilities to exercise control over events to accomplish desired goals” (p. 31). Self-efficacy influences the choices a person makes, the amount of effort applied, their level of endurance through setbacks, their ability to bounce back from setbacks, and the quality of their thought process therewithin. An efficacy expectation is the individual's conviction that he or she can orchestrate the necessary actions to perform a given task. Hence the efficacy question asks if a person is able to organize and execute the actions required to complete a task at a desired level (Bandura, 1986).

People with strong self-efficacy focus on their progress and eventual mastery, whereas people with limited self-efficacy focus on their weakness and what could go wrong (Bandura, 1986). Bandura asserted that two people with the same level of skill will



achieve a task solely based on their belief in their ability to control the outcome. Bandura furthermore argued that these self-beliefs can be established and fostered in four ways: success/mastery experiences, vicarious modeling, social/verbal persuasion, and minimizing physiological/bodily stress. A success experience is one in which a person achieves a goal and perceives the personal benefit of confirming a positive outcome. Such an experience would assure a person that another encounter with the same task would ensure success, thus increasing self-efficacy. Opportunities to emulate desired behaviors through vicarious modeling can enable a person to confidently acquire new skills and compare their efforts to others. This provides immediate feedback to inform the success of their efforts to reach new goals. Modeling can provide an opening to social persuasion, wherein a person receives realistic encouragement to achieve a task. Social persuasion is most effective when the encouragement provided is within range of the person's actual ability. If a person is continually encouraged in completing a task that is exceedingly beyond his skill level, his belief in his ability to complete the task will diminish. The fourth means of fostering self-efficacy is through minimizing physiological stress. Bandura wrote that people often depend on their emotional or physical reaction to a task as an indicator of their ability to complete the task. If stress quickly abounds or tension or fatigue sets in, a person is less likely to believe he can achieve a goal. The physical and/or emotional response creates an additional barrier to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986).

***Bandura's Theory Applied to Education.*** Social Cognitive Theory and the self-efficacy construct apply seamlessly to educational practice. Bandura's writing on student and teacher efficacy draw a direct connection (Bandura, 1997). Teachers can assist

students who face challenges in daily learning by addressing their mental/emotional/physical states (cognition/personal factors), modifying their approach to the learning (cognition/behavior), and establishing a learning-centered or student-centered classroom (environment). Teachers can further build students' self-efficacy by providing opportunities for them to experience success in learning, modeling the learning of the content, encouraging and praising student effort, and providing opportunities to minimize stress. The implementation of SEL provides daily opportunities for teachers to promote the development of student efficacy; however, the focus of this study is to support teacher efficacy.

***Teacher Efficacy.*** Bandura (1997) defined teacher efficacy as a teacher's perception of his or her ability to deliver desired student outcomes, even among difficult or unmotivated students. Teacher efficacy has also been defined as "teachers' belief or conviction that they can influence how well students learn, even those who may be difficult or unmotivated" (Guskey & Passaro, 1994, p. 4). The teacher efficacy question asks if a person feels capable to effectively perform the roles of a teacher, which include organizing, planning, and delivering instruction as well as maintaining positive relationships with students.

Teacher efficacy is fundamental in determining if teachers will effectively implement their daily tasks; consequently, it is essential to nurture and develop this quality in every practicing teacher. Common teacher challenges include long work hours, over-crowded classrooms, student learning disabilities, student behavior issues, lack of administrative support, and more. Teachers' beliefs in their ability to effectively realize their daily professional goals - despite added challenges - are essential to sustaining their

high levels of efficacy. They consequently experience more job satisfaction, less job-related stress, and higher rates of success with management of student behavior (Barni et al., 2019; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Research in teacher efficacy reveals a variety of related findings. Rotter's early work bolsters teacher efficacy-related beliefs that internal forces within a teacher's control are more impactful on student outcomes than environmental, external influences (1966). Hoy and Woolfolk (1993) studied the relationship between a healthy school climate and teacher efficacy. They found that teachers report a higher sense of efficacy to influence student learning when their school climate reflects decisive administrative support. Shooks (2019) found that teachers report a higher sense of efficacy to implement trauma-informed instructional practices when they receive adequate training. Jennings et al. (2014) reported that successful implementation of SEL must include teachers who can "serve as a positive role model, facilitate interpersonal problem solving, and create environments that are conducive to social and emotional learning." According to Jennings and Greenberg (2009), successful SEL teachers have a high degree of social and emotional competence. In correlation, they demonstrate a high degree of teacher efficacy.

In the current study, teachers' sense of efficacy is examined in relation to their perceived ability to effectively implement SEL. To foster teacher efficacy, it is essential to provide opportunities for teachers to experience success in teaching SEL, to model the teaching of SEL, to encourage and praise teacher efforts, and to assist teachers with minimizing related stress. These efforts align with Bandura's promotion of teacher efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

### ***Motivational Theory***

Derived from his Theory of Human Motivation (1943), Maslow's hierarchy of needs describes the tangible and intangible influences that drive human behavior. Maslow wrote, "Human needs arrange themselves in hierarchies of prepotency. That is to say, the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more prepotent need. Man is a perpetually wanting animal" (1943, p. 370).

Prior to Maslow, studies in behavior and motivation were grounded in behaviorism and psychopathology. Maslow focused on man's motivation to survive and ultimately reach levels of fulfillment beyond behaviorism and psychopathology (1943, 1954). This concept was best illustrated by a pyramid to display the progressive levels through which Maslow initially purported that humans ascend to reach higher levels of achievement and satisfaction. The lower levels are represented by basic human needs (physiological and safety), which include food, warmth rest, and security. The middle levels of the hierarchy comprise psychological human needs (esteem and belongingness/love), which include relationships, prestige, and accomplishment. The highest level of the hierarchy is represented by self-fulfillment needs, which include creative expression and achievement of human potential. Maslow's initial premise was that in order for humans to begin pursuing or reaching their full potential, their lower level needs must first be fulfilled (1943, 1954). He wrote, "when these in turn are satisfied, again new (and still 'higher') needs emerge and so on" (Maslow, 1943, p. 375).

Maslow's hierarchy is further partitioned into Deficiency (D) needs and Growth (G) needs. Whereas deficiency needs emerge as a result of deprivation, growth needs emerge as a person desires self-development (1943, 1954). Maslow's hierarchy later

included three additional levels - cognitive needs, aesthetic needs, and transcendence needs. These added levels further classified growth needs to include knowledge and understanding, appreciation of beauty, and superhuman experiences (1970).

In Maslow's later writings, he revised his theory in relation to the order in which the needs in his hierarchy were ultimately met. Whereas he initially proposed that deficiency needs must be satisfied before growth needs would emerge, Maslow later integrated the idea that movement on the hierarchy was not necessarily in ascending order. Instead, the emergence of human needs was more flexible and could appear in varying order (1987). McLeod (2020) provided a supporting analogy of a starving artist like van Gogh, whose artistic expression suggests fulfilling a need for self-actualization, despite living in poverty. With Maslow's reformed idea that human needs can emerge in any place and any order on the hierarchy, he confirmed that humans can seek love without a sense of security, or they can express creativity without feeling rested. He also confirmed that multiple human needs can emerge simultaneously, and that humans are in an ongoing state of growth and satisfying of varying needs (Maslow, 1987).

***Maslow's Theory Applied to Education.*** Maslow's hierarchy is a fundamental component of educational theory that is often cited in teacher preparation programs (Aspy, 1969; Korthagen, 2004; Neto, 2015). For the purpose of this study, Maslow's hierarchy is foundational in two ways: 1) it provides a model by which educators can meet varying student needs; 2) it addresses the priority of teaching the "whole child" (Tate, 2019). In a literal sense, schools seek to meet student needs on multiple levels of Maslow's hierarchy. These needs can emerge in any given sequence. Schools provide the physiological needs of food, warmth, and shelter. They provide schoolwide order and

safety and a means to address immediate health needs. Schools provide the opportunity for students to feel connected by maintaining relationships with peers, teachers, and staff. Many schools around the world prioritize promoting students' personal growth by nurturing their self-esteem and celebrating their achievements (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021; "What is Social-Emotional Learning," 2019). While these educational aims correlate Maslow's intent to provide a framework for meeting human needs, his hierarchy also provides an opportunity for educators to ensure that they teach the whole child. Specifically, educators recognize that their role is not only to teach academics and grade student performance, their role also entails meeting students' social and emotional needs to enhance their academic learning. Maslow supported this holistic approach to education (Maslow, 1970; McLeod, 2020). SEL serves the purpose of meeting students' varying social and emotional needs, as expressed in Maslow's hierarchy.

***Social and Emotional Learning.*** SEL entails curriculum that equips students and adults to maintain cooperative relationships, make responsible decisions, manage strong emotions, communicate clearly and assertively, solve problems effectively, recognize emotions in self and others, and demonstrate empathy for others. In SEL, students are provided the opportunity to learn, discuss and practice these skills with a teacher's guidance ("What is Social and Emotional Learning", 2019). SEL can be presented as organized lessons or as supplementary components included within a traditional instructional lesson. It can contain pictures, videos, writing prompts, and group activities that allow students to engage with other students, gain insights, and set goals toward improving their social and emotional well-being. SEL does not replace classroom

management or discipline; however, it supports classroom management and discipline through relationship-building, problem-solving, and emotion regulation. It addresses the educational need to “teach the whole child,” enabling teachers to help students pursue academic achievement while improving their social and emotional well-being (Tate, 2019).

SEL is fundamental to academic learning; students must be mentally and emotionally available in order to fully access academic curriculum. SEL allows students to self-regulate and refocus, which provides for the enhancement of academic learning in a safe and positive environment (Tate, 2019, Weissberg, 2016). There are multiple positive student outcomes of an effective SEL program. They include positive student attitudes toward themselves and others, increased student confidence and commitment to school, positive social behaviors with peers and adults, reduced issues with behavior and mental distress, and improved academic performance (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021; Tate, 2019; Weissberg, 2016). Studies have confirmed the significantly beneficial effects of SEL in schools, when effectively implemented (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021; Jennings et al., 2014; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). In a meta-analysis by Payton et al., three large-scale studies were conducted to measure the impact of SEL programs in elementary and middle schools. The results of these 300+ studies indicated that SEL significantly benefits “students with and without behavioral and emotional problems” (Payton et al., 2008, p. 3). Noted improvements were reflected in “students’ social-emotional skills, attitudes about self and others, connection to school, positive social behavior, and academic performance” (Payton et al., 2008, p. 3). Additionally, student

academic achievement improved by 11 to 17 percentile points. Payton et al. assert that compared to other school initiatives with similar aims, “SEL programs are among the most successful youth-development programs offered to school-age youth” (2008, p. 3).

SEL continues to be implemented in schools across the world via multiple approaches. Other popular programs that are classroom-focused and organized with a comprehensive curriculum include Open Circle (Porche et al., 2014), for student development in managing emotions, social awareness, positive relationships, and problem-solving; and RULER (Torrente, 2015), for developing student skills in recognizing, expressing, and managing emotions. A notable component of Open Circle is the focus on adults learning to model and reinforce desired student practices during the school day and in the home environment. Teachers who implemented this curriculum in one study showed a 90% endorsement of the program, due to its schoolwide approach and focus on training and modeling (Porche et al., 2014). RULER is a school-based program that provides comprehensive professional development for teachers “to create more organized, and intellectually and emotionally supportive learning environments” (Torrente et al., 2015, p. 3). This approach yielded high results in supporting students’ emotional well-being more so than their academic achievement (Torrente et al., 2015). Another widespread approach to providing SEL is the implementation of after-school programs. According to Hurd and Deutsch (2017), after-school programs provide opportunities to foster students’ social and emotional well-being by providing adult role models in a safe, structured, and nurturing environment. They note that one drawback to SEL in school-run after-school programs is the inconsistent attendance among participating students, which bears uncertain outcomes. Despite any challenges to the



inherent nature of after-school programs to promote social and emotional wellbeing, they are considered beneficial for positive student outcomes.

In this study, SEL was taught using principles employed by CASEL. CASEL bases its practices on five Core Competencies: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making. CASEL is a highly acclaimed proponent of SEL; it provides comprehensive curriculum for schools and classrooms as well as homes and communities (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2021). Durlak et al. (2011) highlighted the need for an effective SEL program to be SAFE (Sequenced, Active, Focused, and Explicit). CASEL meets these criteria by providing a coordinated series of activities, providing opportunities to actively apply the learning, concentrating on personal and social skills, and clarifying its purpose in developing those skills. An example of a SAFE activity in the classroom might include learning how to resolve conflict and then explicitly using those conflict resolution techniques when an opportunity arises. Another example would be allowing for students to communicate their feelings and then modeling how to understand another person's feelings.

To supplement the CASEL curriculum, we employed Second Step, a web based SEL curriculum that provides organized lessons and activities that provide a framework for developing social and emotional competence. The purpose of Second Step is to help students gain confidence through goal setting, responsible decision-making, and learning how to socially integrate with others (Committee of Children, 2021). In this model, students engage in weekly lessons led by teachers who facilitate their understanding through discussion, modeling, reflective writing, and/or partner work. Skills and concepts

that are introduced by Second Stepped are reinforced by teachers throughout the week as opportunities for application emerge. Second Step architects affirm that SEL:

isn't...a feel-good activity...psychotherapy...an attempt to parent kids...nor is it a substitute for core academic subjects... Instead, SEL concepts provide an extra dimension to education, focusing on improving cooperation, communication, and decision making. (The Purpose of SEL: Let's Be Clear section, para. 1)

***Current Need for SEL.*** Before COVID-19 affected schools across the globe, teens identified anxiety and depression as a major challenge among their peers. According to the U.S. Child Protection Service, about 5.5 million children demonstrated evidence of abuse in 30% of cases. Sixty-five percent of these cases were characterized by neglect, 18% physical abuse, 10% sexual abuse, and 7% mental abuse. Since the extended school closures of 2020, students have become more distracted by pressures and continue to suffer from mental health issues (“How Common is PTSD”, 2019). In the past two decades, an overwhelming majority of students with social, emotional, and behavioral problems have not received adequate services they need to support these challenges (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2017). SEL is not a guaranteed solution to resolve these myriad concerns; however, it can provide a means to navigate and potentially relieve ongoing stress. It can provide an opportunity for students and teachers to intentionally identify and navigate their own trauma, in pursuit of learning ways to cope and/or overcome. Teachers and administrators acknowledge the value of integrating SEL into schools, and they agree that more guidance and training is needed to make it more accessible (Cressey, 2017; Payton et al., 2008; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

## **Related Research**

While not extensive, a considerable number of studies have been conducted in relation to implementation of SEL and related teacher efficacy. These studies have further described teachers' experiences with teaching SEL and their perceptions of their ability to implement the program.

In a 2009 study, Ransford et al. determined that teachers' psychological experiences and perceptions of support given were correlated with their successful implementation of SEL. More specifically, teacher efficacy, and teacher perception of external support (i.e. administrative, training, and coaching) were positively associated with their effective program implementation. Conversely, teachers who reported elevated levels of burnout and negative perceptions of external support were the least effective in program implementation. This quantitative study collected data through web-based surveys submitted anonymously by 133 primary and elementary teachers. Descriptive analysis was used to describe teachers' psychological experiences, curriculum supports, and quality/dosage of implementation. The results of this study suggest that efforts to structure SEL program and provide sufficient training and coaching to teachers will positively impact their sense of efficacy in program implementation.

In a 2012 study, Collie et al. found that teachers' comfort level with providing SEL instruction and their perceptions of student motivation had the most powerful impact on their successful implementation of the program. These two variables influenced teachers' sense of efficacy, stress, and job satisfaction. This quantitative study collected data through electronic surveys submitted by 664 elementary and secondary teachers. Structural equation modeling was used to describe results from a teacher stress inventory,

a teacher efficacy scale, a job satisfaction survey, a school environment questionnaire, and a teacher beliefs scale. The results of this study suggest that accounting for teachers' perception of comfort with teaching SEL is essential when designing SEL curriculum and providing teacher training and coaching. While this study devised a comprehensive survey that referenced questions addressing multiple measures (teacher efficacy, teacher stress, teacher beliefs, job satisfaction, school environment), the survey employed in the current study only focused on teacher efficacy.

In a study conducted in 2011 and replicated in 2014 and 2017, Jennings et al. consistently reported on the significant impact of teachers' social and emotional competence with student engagement and classroom interactions. Teachers who underwent training in the CARE (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education) program consistently demonstrated improved well-being in and out of the classroom. The CARE program's effects on teacher efficacy were consistent, yet somewhat varied. The 2011 study reported an increase in teacher efficacy in instruction and student engagement, while the 2014 study reported an increase in positive teacher affect. These quantitative studies collected data through electronic surveys submitted by different cohorts of teachers. The first study included 31 elementary teachers from high poverty, low-performing schools. The second study included 55 elementary teachers in self-contained classrooms. The third study included a diverse sample of 224 elementary teachers. The results of these studies underscore the importance of providing a means to foster teachers' social and emotional competence and well-being in order to equip them to be effective classroom teachers and SEL instructors.

## **Summary**

As conveyed in this study's problem of practice, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented students and teachers with multiple obstacles that threaten teachers' sense of efficacy and students' academic, social, and emotional development. The research presented in this literature review indicates an ongoing need to foster teachers' sense of efficacy, which will equip them to be more effective classroom teachers amidst pandemic-related instructional changes. The research also indicates an ongoing need to provide SEL for all students, particularly in response to pandemic-related challenges. There is persistent evidence that the infusion of SEL into school curriculum increases student confidence and commitment to school, promotes positive social behaviors with peers and adults, reduces issues with behavior and mental distress, and improves academic performance. As students and teachers are confronted with navigating the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, those who do not receive social and emotional support will fare worse than those who do. Studies also show that teachers who are sufficiently trained and supported in their efforts to teach SEL maintain higher levels of teacher efficacy. This study describes teachers' sense of efficacy and their experiences in implementing a state-mandated SEL program during a global pandemic. An examination of the methodology – which includes the research design, setting, participant sample, data collection, and data analysis methods – is presented in Chapter 3.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

This chapter provides descriptions of the methodologies employed to determine teachers' perceived efficacy and to describe their experiences teaching Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) at Winston Middle School (WMS). After reviewing the problem of practice, this chapter presents the research approach and design for this study. The setting and population are described, followed by a description of the study participants. The intervention is then chronicled, followed by the details of data collection instruments, data collection methods, and data analysis. This chapter concludes with a review of steps taken to ensure rigor and trustworthiness, followed by ethical considerations.

#### **Problem of Practice**

The ongoing spread of the COVID-19 virus continues to impact and challenge how schools operate daily. Life for teachers and students around the world has been permanently disrupted, as we continue to witness the educational fallout due to drastic changes in school schedules, modifications of classrooms, and implementation of online learning. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacted academic impacts and social and emotional impacts for students and teachers worldwide, including those at WMS (Azevedo et al., 2020; Eyles et al., 2020; Soma, 2020). Research indicates that there is a need for schools to provide opportunities for students to engage in daily SEL (Azevedo et al., 2020; Eyles et al., 2020; Gross & Opalka, 2020; Horesh & Brown, 2020; Lee, 2020;

Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Studies consistently show that SEL promotes student well-being, higher academic achievement, and positive relationships among children and adults (Tate, 2019; Weissberg, 2016; “What is Social Emotional Learning”, 2019). Stone-Johnson and Weiner (2020) also assert that teacher efficacy is a mitigating factor in the success of an SEL program, and school administrators are positioned to influence teacher efficacy among their staff.

### **Research Questions**

The collection and analysis of data in this study provide answers to the following research questions:

1. How do teachers perceive their sense of efficacy in implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?
2. What are the experiences of teachers implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?

This study describes teachers’ perception of their efficacy and documents their experiences as implementers of our SEL program.

### **Research Approach**

This study is grounded in action research, an approach that addresses the immediate needs of a specific group in a unique setting in which the study is implemented (Anderson & Herr, 2015). Mertler (2020) further characterizes action research as “research that is done by teachers [educators] for themselves” (p. 6). In action research, the researcher conducts a study in the working environment where the problem is identified. Because I am an administrator assigned to supervise the implementation of SEL at my school, this study is best suited to occur through action research.

This study implemented a convergent mixed methods design, allowing for the collection of quantitative and qualitative data to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2015). Creswell (2015) defined mixed methods research as “an approach to research...in which the investigator gathers both quantitative [closed-ended] and qualitative [open-ended] data, integrates the two, and then draws interpretations based on the combined strengths of both sets of data to understand research problems” (p. 2). This study’s convergent mixed methods approach provided for the collection and analysis of survey responses (quantitative), semi-structured interview responses (qualitative), and observational feedback (qualitative). Data retrieved from these methods and auxiliary documents were compiled, analyzed, and triangulated to interpret the results and propose new knowledge that informed this study.

A philosophical paradigm comprises the researcher’s beliefs that inform the way they approach research (Creswell, 2015). This study adhered to pragmatism, allowing for a practical application of “what works” in the collection and analysis of data and the overall design (Creswell, 2015, 16). A convergent mixed methods approach to this study provided the opportunity to employ what worked, by implementing quantitative and qualitative methods to answer the research questions. The remainder of this chapter recounts the setting; study participants; instruments; and methods employed for data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of findings.

### **Setting**

The setting for this study is Winston Middle School (WMS), a Title I school with a rich history established in the 1800’s. WMS was founded as Winston High School in the segregated South, where African American students in southern and western Spain



County were formally educated. Today, WMS serves students in grades 6th through 8th, who reside in nearby communities in Spain County. In the 2020-2021 school year, WMS served 819 students; 45% were Caucasian, 35% were African American, and 20% were Hispanic, Asian, or Native American (2020). Eighty-two percent of WMS students were identified as students in poverty. The school report card showed gradual growth in specific focus areas over the past 3 years. On the 2018-2019 South Carolina School Report Card, WMS earned an “Average” rating in the following areas: Academic Achievement, Preparing for Success, English Learners Progress, and Student Progress. An “Average” rating indicates that school performance meets the criteria to ensure all students meet the profile of the South Carolina Graduate. WMS also rated “Good” in Student Engagement. A “Good” rating indicates that school performance exceeds the criteria to ensure all students meet the profile of the South Carolina Graduate (2020). WMS was also in its second full year as a PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention Supports) school. PBIS provides a 3-tiered system that integrates schoolwide procedures and expectations into daily operations to positively affect student outcomes (Positive Behavior Intervention Supports [PBIS], 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic required that the 2020-2021 school year began with comprehensive regulations established across the state and school district. These regulations limited the number of students allowed in each classroom and reinforced social distancing practices in every aspect of the school day (Roberts, 2020). In conjunction with these guidelines, Spain County schools were mandated to adhere to strict instructional modifications that either followed a hybrid instructional model or virtual instructional model. Students in the hybrid model were considered “brick and

mortar” students, because at least part and potentially all their instruction would be physically conducted in the school building. Students in the virtual model were considered “virtual” students, because all their instruction would be provided outside of the building in a completely online environment.

The hybrid model allowed half of the brick and mortar students to attend school in the building on Mondays and Tuesdays, while the other half completed asynchronous (online, at-home) assignments. On Wednesdays and Thursdays, the students then switched places, allowing for each half to spend two days of instruction in the building and two days at home completing asynchronous work. On Fridays, all brick and mortar students attended Google Meets for teacher-led instruction. Teachers disseminated all assignments (synchronous and asynchronous) to students by posting them into Google Classroom. Students who did not participate in the hybrid instructional model attended school through the Spain County virtual school. This model provided online instruction every day through a learning management system maintained by designated Spain County teachers and administrators.

Classroom teachers at WMS include Academic teachers, who teach English Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies. These teachers are identified in this study by grade levels (6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup>). Classroom teachers at WMS also include Explore teachers. Explore subjects include P.E./Health, Chorus, Band, Orchestra, Drama, Art, Keyboarding, Technology, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and Math/English Intervention. Approximately 60 WMS teachers began the new school year, 14 of which were new to the building. None of the new teachers were new to the profession. Upon their return to the new school year, three WMS teachers were drafted to

teach full time in the virtual model. Eighteen additional teachers were drafted to teach part-time virtual and part-time brick and mortar classes. All were required to receive ancillary training to deliver online instruction in their assigned models.

## **Participants**

Quantitative data were gathered for this study by administering a Teacher Efficacy Survey to every Academic and Explore teacher at WMS. Teachers electronically submitted responses on a voluntary basis, and they were given the option to respond anonymously. Thirty-six out of 60 teachers submitted responses to the survey. Twenty-one of those teachers were willing to be interviewed and observed again. I employed purposeful sampling to select 10 of those teachers who would best inform the analysis and interpretation of the data collected (Creswell, 2015). The 10 teachers whom I selected provided responses that represented a very high or very low sense of efficacy in teaching SEL. I selected teachers who rated at either extreme of the survey results to enable me to further identify contrasts among their subsequent interview responses. One teacher in the high efficacy group later requested not to be interviewed. Of the nine remaining teachers, there was one 6th grade science teacher, one 6th grade special education teacher, one 7th grade English language arts teacher, one 7th/8th grade special education teacher, two 8th grade English language arts teachers, one 8th grade social studies teacher and two Explore teachers (math intervention and technology). Although diverse representation was not pursued during sampling, the sample participants represented a heterogeneous mixture of teachers from varying genders, races, grade levels, subject areas, and years of experience.

## **Intervention**

In August of 2020, I partnered with Ms. Browning, our school's behavioral specialist to brainstorm the components of an SEL program that would suit the needs of our students. Ms. Browning subsequently integrated components of CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), Second Step, and other social-emotional resources to design a curriculum of student-centered warmups, videos, discussions, and digital assignments. With the recommendation of our administration team, we selected nine teachers to serve as SEL team members. These members represented every grade level, multiple content areas and multiple student ability levels. Our team members included one 6th grade social studies teacher, one 7th grade math teacher, one 8th grade English language arts teacher, three special education teachers (representing three ability levels), and three Explore teachers (one math interventionist and two ESOL teachers). Our team consisted of one African American female, one African American male, and seven Caucasian females.

Ms. Browning and I conducted three virtual meetings with this team prior to our return to school. During these meetings, we introduced the team to SEL and explained the member roles in the implementation of the program. The team members would serve as liaisons between Ms. Browning and all classroom teachers to communicate information and feedback related to SEL implementation. The team members would also review the curriculum for each upcoming month and provide feedback to Ms. Browning prior to her delivering it to teachers for implementation.

Our teachers returned to school from the summer and received their first introduction to our SEL program. The SEL team members were put in pairs and tasked

with introducing SEL to their individual teams (6th grade, 7th grade, 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and Explore). They utilized the same digital content that Ms. Browning and I used to introduce SEL to them. The roll-out of SEL required that 51 classroom teachers receive this training to prepare them to teach SEL this year. During the training session, teachers were presented with the purpose of SEL and how implementation would look at WMS. Teachers were also informed that this was a state-mandated initiative that would be included as a part of our daily schedule.

The addition of SEL instruction to our teachers' responsibilities was one of several significant changes to instructional and operational models for this school year. Immediately, it required a change in our bell schedule to include a 30-minute slot of time set aside at the end of each school day to provide SEL instruction. As the administrator assigned to assist the SEL team, I pondered the following questions: Would our teachers successfully navigate this uncharted territory? What would be our instructional challenges? Would our teachers surmount these challenges?

We initiated SEL during the first week of our students' return to school. Academic teachers were responsible for teaching an SEL lesson during the last 30 minutes of each day. Explore teachers were unencumbered during this time, and they served as substitute SEL teachers when needed. Table 3.1 provides a list of the key players and their roles in this intervention.

Table 3.1 Key Players and Their Roles

Name	Title / Position	Description of Role
Wendy Barr Holmes	WMS Administrator Research Practitioner	Facilitate implementation of SEL program; provide administrative guidance to Ms. Browning; conduct research study.
Ms. Browning	WMS Behavior Specialist SEL Curriculum Designer-Developer	Compile resources to generate SEL curriculum; distribute SEL curriculum to teachers; solicit SEL team feedback for ongoing curriculum development.
N/A	SEL Team Members (Academic and Explore Teachers)	Receive initial SEL training; train the teachers prior to SEL implementation; attend SEL meetings; liaison between Ms. Browning and SEL teachers;
N/A	Academic Teachers (English Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies)	Receive faculty SEL training prior to implementation; review pre-packaged SEL curriculum; deliver daily SEL instruction to students.
N/A	Explore Teachers (P.E./Health, Chorus, Band, Orchestra, Drama, Art, Keyboarding, Technology, ESOL, Math/English Intervention)	Receive faculty SEL training prior to implementation; review pre-packaged SEL curriculum; serve as a substitute SEL teacher in absence of Academic teachers.

Teachers accessed the lessons through links leading to curriculum documents provided by Ms. Browning via email. Monthly curriculum lessons were compiled into one Google document, including daily warmups, activities and links to all videos and assignments. The students joined a grade level Google Classroom, where they accessed the associated activities and written assignments.

The SEL warmups included breathing exercises and student check-ins. Discussion questions were generated typically in connection to a video or related content focused on a predetermined topic for each grade level. Teachers and students engaged in discussions related to the questions provided. The lesson typically ended in a writing assignment that supplemented the discussion and applied to the lesson topic. Some SEL topics included student self-efficacy, stress & anxiety, bullying & cyberbullying, negativity bias, and time management. The curriculum was differentiated to accommodate the needs of each grade level based on developmental and environmental needs. Near the end of each month, Ms. Browning emailed the new curriculum to the SEL team members to preview the embedded links to the lessons, videos, and assignments. Team members provided feedback to confirm that the lessons for the next month were ready for teacher implementation. Classroom teachers received the upcoming month's curriculum via email at least a week before implementation. Figure 3.1 provides an illustration of the intervention timeline. The intervention was cyclical in nature, as evidenced by feedback provided each month in order to apply ongoing improvements to implementation.

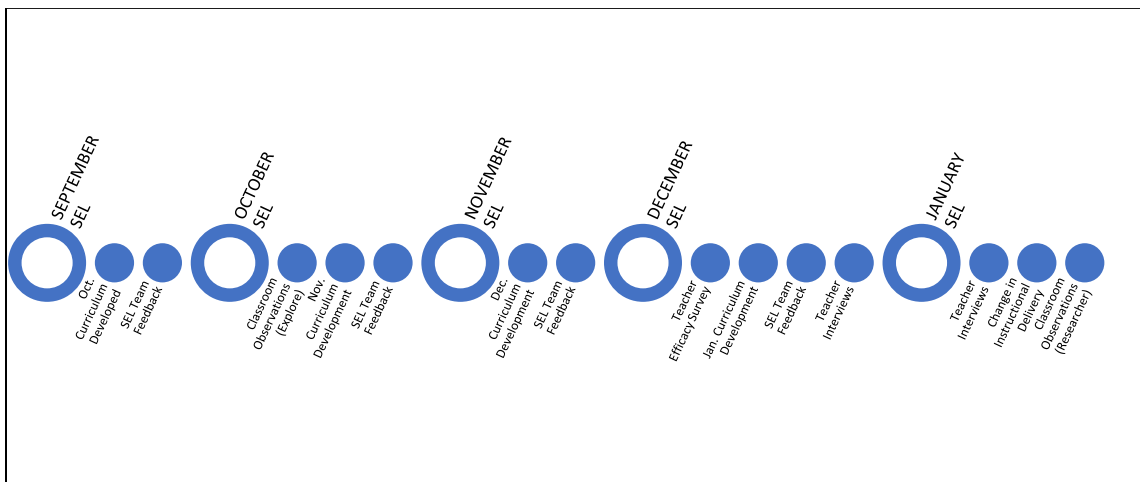


Figure 3.1 Implementation / Intervention Timeline

## **Data Collection Instruments**

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative instruments for data collection. Instruments used for data collection included a teacher efficacy survey, a teacher interview protocol, a classroom observation template, and a blank Google document. Each instrument was employed to collect data to answer the research questions posed in this study.

### ***Teacher Efficacy Survey***

The teacher efficacy survey consisted of 20 questions that asked participants to assess their ability to complete tasks required of SEL instructors. The questions were classified into four explicit categories: Teacher Influence, Lesson Preparation, SEL Instruction, and Student Benefits. Four survey questions referred to Teacher Influence. Responses to these questions measured how empowered teachers felt to give their input and how much they felt their input would be heard and considered. Three survey questions referred to Lesson Preparation. Responses to these questions measured teachers' perceived ability to access the lesson plans, to collaborate with other teachers on the content, and their overall feeling of preparation prior to teaching the lesson. Six survey questions referred to SEL Instruction. Responses to these questions measured teachers' perceived ability to promote trust and safety with their students, to enhance enjoyment with the lesson, and to motivate students to complete the SEL assignments. Three survey questions referred to Student Benefits. Responses to these questions measured teachers' perceived ability to establish positive teacher-student relationships, resolve problem behaviors, and empower students to overcome challenging home and community conditions. Each question began with the words, "How much can



you...” A sample question in the SEL Instruction category was, “How much can you do to make your students feel safe to engage in SEL lessons?” The choices provided for each question mirrored a Likert scale, wherein 5 possible answers ranged from “A Great Deal” to “Not at All”. Teacher responses were submitted and automatically organized within a Google spreadsheet. These responses provided quantitative data that reflected teachers’ sense of efficacy and helped answer research question #1 (How do teachers perceive their sense of efficacy in implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?). In the survey, teachers were invited to participate in follow-up interviews and subsequent SEL classroom observations. An example of the Teacher Efficacy Survey can be found in Appendix A.

### ***Semi-Structured Teacher Interview Protocol***

The instrument used to collect data from the teacher interviews was 10-question protocol that contained open-ended questions to allow the participants to describe their experiences teaching SEL. The interview questions asked participants to describe their understanding of SEL and their familiarity and comfort with teaching the content. The participants were also asked to elaborate on their survey responses to further illuminate their sense of efficacy in teaching SEL. They were then asked to share their perceptions of positive and negative impacts of this the COVID-19 pandemic on our students and teachers during the implementation of SEL. Finally, they were asked how they would improve the program. This 10-question protocol was designed to collect data to help answer research question #2 (What are the experiences of teachers implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?). An example of the Teacher Interview Protocol can be found in Appendix B.

### ***Post-Interview Classroom Observation Document***

The instrument used to conduct classroom observations following the teacher interviews was a blank Google document in which I typed all observations in free form. These observations included direct dialogue, physical responses, and personal conclusions/questions posed. These observational data were collected to help answer question #2 (What are the experiences of teachers implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?). A sample Google document of these observation data can be found in Appendix C.

### ***Initial Classroom Observation Template***

The instrument used by Explore teachers to conduct initial classroom observations was a template printed on a half-sheet of paper where they wrote open responses. The questions provided were: “What are three things you notice?” “What are two things you wonder?” “What is one thing you suggest?” During the month of October, 70 observations were conducted of 33 different teachers by 15 Explore teachers. These data were collected by other people outside of my data collection phase, and this instrument was designed by Ms. Browning. This instrument was not designed to intentionally answer either research question in the current study; however, it provided data that helped to answer question #2 (What are the experiences of teachers implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?). An example of the Classroom Observation Template can be found in Appendix D.

Table 3.2 displays the alignment of each data collection instrument with the type of data collected with each instrument and the research question answered by each instrument.

Table 3.2 Research Questions – Instruments – Data Types

	Research Question	Data Collection Instrument	Data Collection Type
Research Question #1	How do teachers perceive their sense of efficacy in implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?	Teacher Efficacy Survey	Quantitative
Research Question #2	What are the experiences of teachers implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?	Teacher Interview Questionnaire  Blank Google Doc (word processor)  Classroom Observation Template (document analysis)	Qualitative

### Data Collection Methods

Data were collected for this study’s purpose during three different intervals. Quantitative teacher survey data were collected in December of 2020. Qualitative teacher interview data were collected in December of 2020 and January of 2021. Qualitative classroom observation data were collected in January of 2021. All data were then analyzed and triangulated to determine findings for this study.

After four weeks of implementation, Explore teachers conducted 70 initial classroom observations of SEL lessons in all classrooms. The classroom observations provided artifacts for document analysis to help answer research question #2 (What are the experiences of teachers implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global

pandemic?) These data also provided insight into each observer's critical thinking and ideas for improvement, which guided subsequent discussion among the SEL team.

After 13 weeks of implementation, I invited every classroom teacher to complete and submit a teacher efficacy survey. The survey was delivered to all WMS teachers via email as a Google form. The data collected from this survey contained attitudinal responses that indicated teachers' perceived efficacy to teach SEL. These data helped answer research question #1 (How do teachers perceive their sense of efficacy in implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?). Once analyzed, these data also guided subsequent sampling for the interviews that followed. To select sample participants, I first calculated each teacher's efficacy score as indicated by their survey responses. I then extracted the names and scores of the 21 teachers who communicated interest in being interviewed. From those 21 teachers, I employed purposeful sampling to select those with the 5 highest and 5 lowest efficacy scores (Cresswell, 2015). I anticipated that follow-up interviews with these teachers would allow for analysis of survey results at either extreme of teachers' perceived sense of efficacy. Of the 10 teachers selected, one teacher opted out of participation prior to being interviewed. The limited number of survey responses and sample participants reflect a limitation to this study. There were 36 out of 60 teachers who agreed to submit survey responses, and nine out of those 36 gave interview responses. The survey data do not account for the remaining 24 teachers who elected not to respond, and the interview data do not account for the remaining 51 teachers who did not give interviews. The results of this study therefore do not reflect the entire teaching staff.

After 15 weeks of implementation, I began conducting semi-structured interviews with the nine selected teacher participants via Google Meets. The participants were asked open-ended questions to provide qualitative feedback that was coded and categorized to further explain the teachers' survey responses and to describe their experiences teaching SEL. (Creswell, 2015; Saldana, 2013). These questions were devised at the start of the intervention, prior to the administration of the teacher efficacy survey and subsequent sampling. These interviews were conducted over the course of four weeks, three of which occurred during Winter break. Each interview was recorded via Google Meet for subsequent review and response transcription. The qualitative data collected from these interviews provided information that described teacher experiences and perspectives from which inferences could be drawn to answer research question #2 (What are the experiences of teachers implementing SEL during a global pandemic?)

After 17 weeks of implementation, I conducted additional observations to supplement the teachers' interview responses. In these observations, I listened to discussions and observed interactions among students and teachers. As teachers and students asked questions and engaged in dialogue, I transcribed those interactions by typing them into the Google document. I also typed descriptions of teacher and student reactions and my interpretations of teacher and student moods and dispositions based on their engagement with the lessons. This qualitative data provided descriptive accounts that further answered research question #2 (What are the experiences of teachers implementing SEL during a global pandemic?). Table 3.3 displays a timeline of the research procedure for this intervention.

Table 3.3 Research Procedure

Date	Activity
July, 2020	I partnered with Ms. Browning to brainstorm the design of an SEL program and to organize an SEL core team of teachers.
August, 2020	Ms. Browning and I conducted three SEL core team meetings to introduce SEL and to provide “training for the trainers.”
September, 2020	SEL core team members introduced SEL to all classroom teachers.
October, 2020	Explore teachers conducted schoolwide classroom observations of SEL instruction. Observation data were recorded.
December, 2020	I emailed SEL Teacher Efficacy Survey to all classroom teachers, inviting voluntary and anonymous participation.  I completed analysis of survey data.
December, 2020 – January, 2021	I conducted semi-structured teacher interviews with selected participants.
January, 2020	I conducted classroom observations of selected participants teaching SEL.
February, 2020	I completed analysis of interview data and observation data.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

Each interval of data collection was followed by analysis, which was implemented based on the type of data collected.

#### ***Quantitative Data Analysis***

Quantitative data analysis employed descriptive statistics, wherein frequency data and related percentages were calculated to describe teachers’ perceived sense of efficacy

with teaching SEL (Mertler, 2020). To calculate a teacher efficacy scores, I calculated the sum of all responses provided by each teacher in the survey. First, I applied numerical values to each multiple-choice response. “A Great Deal” was equivalent to 5 points, “Quite a Bit” was equivalent to 4 points, “Some” was equivalent to 3 points, “Very Little” was equivalent to 2 points, and “None” or “Not at All” was equivalent to one point. After assigning a numerical value to each response, I added together the values of each individual teacher’s responses. Figure 3.2 displays a sample of the survey responses collected. In the figure, each response has been assigned a numerical value as previously described. For each teacher, I found the sum of the values of their responses and used these totals to compare teacher efficacy levels.

Timestamp	1. How much do you believe you can influence the decisions that are made regarding the implementation of the SEL at our school?	2. How much do you believe you can influence the decisions that are made regarding the design of the SEL curriculum?	3. How much do you believe your views regarding the implementation of SEL will be considered by administration?	4. How much do you believe your views regarding the implementation of SEL will be considered by our Behavior Specialist (Ms. Reddout)?	5. How confident are you with accessing the instructional materials needed for teaching SEL?	
12/10/2020 7:36:40	Very Little	2 Not at All	1 Very Little	2 Somewhat	3 Quite a Bit	4
12/10/2020 9:59:02	Not at All	1 Not at All	1 Not at All	1 Somewhat	3 A Great Deal	5
12/10/2020 7:22:47	Very Little	2 Very Little	2 Very Little	2 Somewhat	3 Quite a Bit	4
12/10/2020 8:44:01	Very Little	2 Very Little	2 Very Little	2 Somewhat	3 A Great Deal	5
12/11/2020 8:15:27	Somewhat	3 Somewhat	3 Somewhat	3 Quite a Bit	4 Quite a Bit	4
12/10/2020 7:34:17	Somewhat	3 Somewhat	3 Somewhat	3 Somewhat	3 Quite a Bit	4
12/9/2020 20:31:02	Very Little	2 Very Little	2 Somewhat	3 Somewhat	3 Quite a Bit	4
12/10/2020 9:27:10	Very Little	2 Somewhat	3 Somewhat	3 Somewhat	3 A Great Deal	5
12/11/2020 14:49:34	Quite a Bit	4 A Great Deal	5 Quite a Bit	4 A Great Deal	5 A Great Deal	5

Figure 3.2 Survey Responses with Assigned Numerical Values

These teacher efficacy scores initially enabled me to make determinations about which survey participants were eligible for participating in the teacher interviews. Additional percentage calculations illuminated teachers’ attitudes through their responses to individual questions. To determine teacher perceptions toward each question asked, I used frequency data (Mertler, 2020). I tallied the number of times each response was given within a single question to determine how often teachers replied, “A Great Deal,”

“Quite a Bit,” “Some,” “Very Little,” and “Not at All.” I then calculated the frequency percentages associated with each response. For example, the first question asked, “How much do you believe you can influence the decisions that are made regarding the implementation of SEL at our school?” To this question, three out of 36 teachers responded, “A Great Deal.” This equates to 8%. To the same question, six out of 36 teachers responded, “Quite a Bit.” This equates to 17%. I completed these steps to provide response percentages for every survey question. These percentages provided insight into teachers’ overall perceptions regarding each survey question. Figure 3.3 provides an illustration of the analysis of quantitative data collected from the teacher efficacy survey responses.

	TEACHER INFLUENCE							
	1. How much do you believe you can influence the decisions that are made regarding the implementation of the SEL at our school?		2. How much do you believe you can influence the decisions that are made regarding the design of the SEL curriculum?		3. How much do you believe your views regarding the implementation of SEL will be considered by administration?		4. How much do you believe your views regarding the implementation of SEL will be considered by our Behavior Specialist (Ms. Reddout)?	
A Great Deal	3	8%	1	3%	2	6%	8	22%
Quite a Bit	6	17%	5	14%	7	19%	10	28%
Somewhat	13	36%	17	47%	18	50%	16	44%
Very Little	12	33%	10	28%	5	14%	2	6%
None/Not at All	2	6%	3	8%	4	11%	0	0%

Figure 3.3 Teacher Efficacy Survey Data Analysis

### ***Qualitative Data Analysis***

As qualitative data consists of words and labels, the data analysis in this study consisted of labeling and coding to organize and interpret the results (Mertler, 2020). After conducting the teacher interviews, I reviewed the video recordings and transcribed the verbatim responses in a Google document. This enabled me to employ in vivo coding



as a first cycle coding method (Saldana, 2013). To do this, I divided the verbatim text into significant words and phrases and copied these items into a Google spreadsheet. I was then able to “split the data into individually coded segments” by applying codes to each item (Saldana, 2013, p. 51). This illuminated patterns, to which I applied constant comparing (i.e. focused coding) in order to generate categories from the codes. From these categories, I derived themes that were divided into topics and subtopics to be discussed in the findings of this study. This method of coding employed an inductive approach, as the coding process was driven by emerging patterns and themes that “allow[ed] the data to speak for itself” (Spencer, 2011, p. 132). According to Saldana, (2013), in vivo coding is also considered inductive coding. Figure 3.4 illustrates the coding process completed for the analysis of the teacher interview data.

A	B	C	D
Statement	Code	Category	
because I could see students and hear students responding.	Explore teacher's reason for positive reaction to SEL	TEACHER REACTIONS TO SEL	
And I see participation, those kids were participating, they had things to talk about.	SEL interaction	STUDENT ENGAGEMENT	
It was a great little read aloud, but neither boy that started out in there had earbuds.	Explore teacher's challenge with classroom instruction	TEACHER CHALLENGES	
In Saxon's room when I went in that day, they had that panda, how are you feeling on the panda scale and they really got into that.	SEL content; WPMS 6th graders enjoy the graphic check-ins	STUDENT REACTION TO SEL	
and even in Freshley's room, we went around the room and everybody in the room shared. When I was in her room, we did the music. Which one of these are you feeling today, as far as the type of music, where would you be?	6th graders enjoy the graphic check-ins; 6th graders easily share with Explore teacher	STUDENT REACTION TO SEL	TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTION
I think 6th graders are easier than any of them.	Explore teacher is most comfortable with 6th grade	TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTION	

Figure 3.4 Teacher Interview Data Analysis

Similar steps were followed to analyze the follow-up classroom observation data from January of 2021. After transcribing each observation in real time, I reviewed the descriptions and quotations gathered from each set of data. I then divided these data into coded segments, from which categories were generated. I then organized these categories

into themes to be discussed in the findings of this study (Saldana, 2013). Figure 3.5 illustrates the coding process completed for the analysis of the follow-up classroom observation data.

1/25/20

TEACHER ENGAGED Ms. K was listing her 3 daily priorities as an example.

TEACHER QUESTION Ms. L asked students if they knew what a priority was.

STUDENT RESPONSE Student attempted to respond, was correct.

TEACHER DISCUSSION Ms. K. confirmed student and further explained what a priority is.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY Ms. L. asked students to write down their 3 priorities and stand up when they're done....then walked around to check..

FULL INVOLVEMENT All but 2 stood...then all but 1...then everyone stood.

STRATEGY Stretch it out, reach for the ceiling and reach for the floor. Have a seat.

TEACHER LED We're going to take our list of 3, and we're going to put them in prioritizing order.

Figure 3.5 Classroom Observation Data Analysis

To conduct document analysis of the classroom observation data compiled in October of 2020, I first compiled the printed observation data protocols, organized by grade level. I then read each response and identified key words and phrases that described the reactions given during each observation. I typed these words and phrases in a spreadsheet and organized them by grade level. From those words and phrases, I applied coded segments, from which categories were generated. I then organized these categories into themes to be discussed in the findings of this study (Saldana, 2013). Figure 3.6 illustrates the coding process completed for the analysis of the October classroom observation data.

students worked independently	Student Engagement	Students are Engaged
engaging student discussion	Student Engagement	Students are Engaged
students engaged with teacher in discussion	Student Engagement	Students are Engaged
students appear to enjoy the lesson	Student Engagement	Students are Engaged
students participate	Student Engagement	Students are Engaged
students are quiet	Student Engagement	Students are NOT Engaged
students not really into it	Student Engagement	Students are NOT Engaged

Figure 3.6 Classroom Observation Document Analysis

### **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

To ensure rigorous quantitative methods, the validity of the associated instruments, data, and results were scrutinized and fortified (Creswell, 2015; Metler, 2020). To this effect, I conducted a trial run of each instrument, to test for errors and ambiguities. Three guidance counselors, one instructional coach, and one administrator reviewed the teacher efficacy survey and the classroom observation form to ensure that the questions were coherent, and the resulting data were suitable for the intended analysis. These steps were taken prior to the beginning of the study to test the validity of the survey. The survey was conducted through an electronic form, to ensure that responses were accurately paired with survey participants. Use of an electronic form also ensured consistency in the format of the responses provided, as all data were automatically organized into a spreadsheet. Upon data collection, all survey responses were checked to ensure that selections were made for each survey question. There were no incomplete surveys included in the quantitative analysis. Member checking was employed with the teacher participants to review and confirm their interview responses.

In order to ensure rigorous qualitative methods, the accuracy, credibility and dependability of the associated instruments, data, and results were scrutinized and fortified (Creswell, 2015; Mertler, 2020). Ms. Browning and an instructional coach reviewed the questions to be asked in the teacher interviews, to ensure that they were clear and open-ended, and the responses gleaned were suitable to inform the desired results. The teacher interview recordings enabled me to listen to teacher responses multiple times to ensure thorough and accurate transcribing and coding practices. Mertler (2020) confirms that an action researcher is a reflective practitioner, which tasks the researcher with “critically exploring what you are doing, why you decided to do it, and what its effects have been” (p. 15). To this end, a trail audit was maintained to chronicle significant events and/or changes that occur throughout the study. This documentation also further informed the results of each phase of the study.

Other considerations for rigor and trustworthiness included triangulation, experience with the process and repetition of the cycle. All quantitative and qualitative data provided in this study were triangulated to further cross check for consistency and accuracy, and to clarify meanings and misconceptions (Mertler, 2020, p. 28). Triangulation methods included comparing teacher interview responses to the survey results to confirm or dispute teacher efficacy claims. Triangulation also included reviewing classroom observation data to confirm or dispute teacher interview responses. This study was conducted within an SEL program that was implemented at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year. I was an administrator who facilitated the development and introduction of SEL to our school, thus confirming my familiarity and experience with curriculum delivery. (Mertler, 2020, p. 28). The developmental nature of our SEL model

was iterative, wherein each month the teachers were provided with a new unit of content to teach. Teachers provided feedback each month to inform the design and development of subsequent lessons. These iterations allow for continued improvement upon previous efforts (Mertler, 2020, p. 28).

In reference to generalizability of the study results, it is important to note that the nature of action research is emergent, cyclical, and changing (Mertler, 2020). In addition, the findings in any action research study are “context-specific” and unique to the setting, participants, and other factors that comprise the study (Mertler, 2020, p. 27).

Consequently, there was limited expectation of generalizability of this study’s findings. Anderson and Herr (2015) confirm that the nature of action research is emergent and cyclical; therefore, it is reasonable to expect that the findings in this study will provide new knowledge and introduce new questions and concerns to continually improve the practice.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Before this study began, permission was requested and granted by the Institutional Review Board, in association with the University of South Carolina. A prerequisite to being approved was my completion of all Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training in association with conducting studies with human subjects. All appropriate training was completed to confirm the intent to comply with ethical research practices as indicated in the CITI training. All participants in this study signed a consent form to confirm their agreement to provide data for collection and analysis. Their participation in the teacher efficacy survey was voluntary and anonymous when preferred. The real names of study participants were never disclosed. Teacher interviews

were conducted in private settings away from the school. Identifiable data, including names of participants, schools, and geographical locations, were replaced with pseudonyms. All data collected was secured on a portable storage device that was inaccessible to other parties.

An important consideration during consideration was my positionality as an administrator and the impact that this would have on teachers' willingness to be transparent and candid about their experiences as SEL instructors. I was intentionally meticulous in my communication with teachers, in order to convey this desired outcome. Figure 3.7 provides an example of the email sent to every teacher to invite them to respond to the teacher efficacy survey.

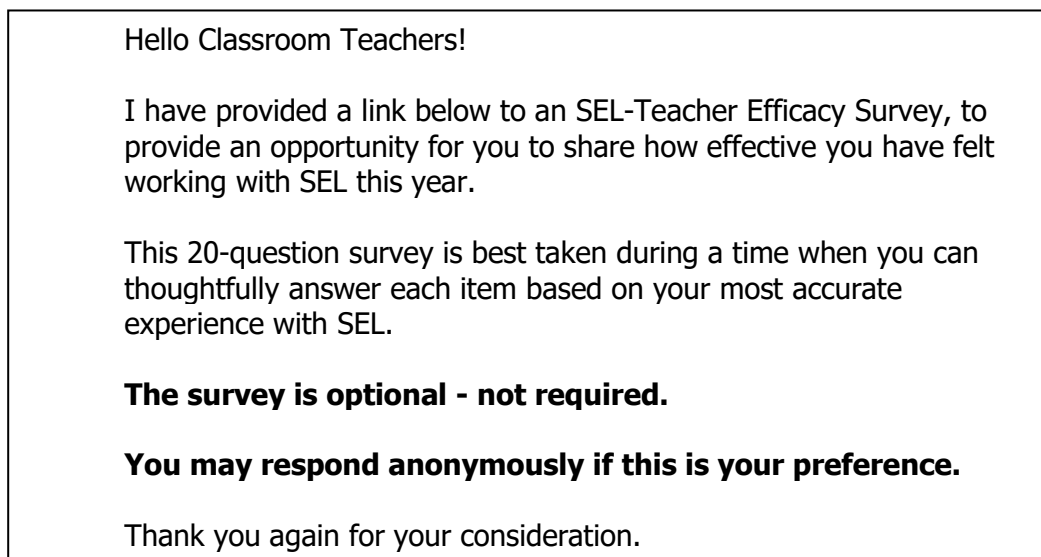


Figure 3.7 Email Invitation for Teacher Efficacy Survey

During the teacher interviews, I asked each question verbatim as provided on the interview protocol. I also remained neutral in my responses, in order to avoid influencing teacher reactions. During the follow-up classroom observations, I remained mindful of most teachers' tendencies to become nervous when an administrator sits down to observe

their instruction. Therefore, prior to observing each teacher's lesson, I emailed them a week in advance to let them know that I would be visiting their classrooms to gather follow up observational data within the next 5 days. While I did bring my laptop to type my notes during the observations, I intentionally postured myself in a manner that conveyed a curious visitor instead of an evaluative observer. I also smiled, made eye contact, and I participated in certain activities when all students participated. This enabled the teacher and the students to demonstrate an ease with the lesson, as opposed to a feeling of being judged by administration.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the methodology of this study, in which the COVID-19 pandemic has further compelled a need for SEL to be implemented by teachers who demonstrate varying levels of efficacy to effectively do so. The research design comprised convergent mixed-methods action research with a convergent design. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed to address the aims of the study. Details were provided regarding the setting, population, and sampling practices conducted. Data were collected via classroom observations, teacher surveys, and teacher interviews. Document analysis was conducted with classroom observation data and student assignment data. Data analysis employed descriptive statistics and coding in order to inform the results. Finally, an outline of the methods, data collection, and data analysis was provided, along with considerations regarding rigor, trustworthiness, and ethics. A comprehensive summary of the findings in this study is presented in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

This chapter presents the data results and findings that were gleaned after analyzing and triangulating the survey results, teacher interviews, classroom observations, and other artifacts.

#### **Problem of Practice**

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacted academic impacts and social and emotional impacts for students and teachers worldwide (Azevedo et al., 2020; Eyles et al., 2020; Tate, 2019; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Procedures and operations for teachers and students at WMS have been considerably disrupted since school closures began in March of 2020. The start of the 2020-2021 school year required that we make drastic changes in school schedules, modify classroom instruction, and implement at-home digital learning to all students. Amid these changes, WMS implemented a state-mandated Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) program to provide social and emotional support for all students. Our concern for teachers was the notion that this added responsibility could potentially challenge their sense of efficacy.

The purpose of this convergent mixed methods study was to describe teachers' sense of efficacy and their experiences with implementing a state mandated SEL program during a global pandemic. Quantitative survey data was collected to document teachers' perceived efficacy as SEL instructors. Qualitative data was collected from semi-structured teacher interviews to enable teachers to report on their instructional



experiences. Additional qualitative data was collected from classroom observations of SEL lessons to further triangulate the findings.

### **Research Questions**

This chapter reveals quantitative and qualitative findings that answer the following research questions:

- 1) How do teachers perceive their sense of efficacy in implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?
- 2) What are the experiences of teachers implementing Social and Emotional Learning initiative during a global pandemic?

### **Data Analysis Results**

The findings for this study are derived from quantitative data analysis of the teacher efficacy survey responses, qualitative data analysis of semi-structured teacher interview responses, and qualitative data analysis of classroom observations of SEL lessons. Document analysis was also conducted with classroom observations of SEL lessons completed by Explore teachers to inform the program's implementation prior to the intervention. Subsequent comparisons among the survey data, teacher interview data and classroom observation data occur in the Triangulation of Findings section of this chapter.

#### ***Teacher Efficacy Survey***

The teacher efficacy survey provided quantitative data that were organized into the four tables below. The survey was administered to collect teacher responses to answer research question #1 (How do teachers perceive their sense of efficacy in implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?).

Table 4.1. Survey Question Responses

Teacher Influence	A Great Deal	Quite a Bit	Somewhat	Very Little	None / Not at All
1. How much do you believe you can influence the decisions that are made regarding the implementation of the SEL at our school?	8%	17%	<b>36%</b>	33%	6%
2. How much do you believe you can influence the decisions that are made regarding the design of the SEL curriculum?	3%	14%	<b>47%</b>	28%	8%
3. How much do you believe your views regarding the implementation of SEL will be considered by administration?	6%	19%	<b>50%</b>	14%	11%
4. How much do you believe your views regarding the implementation of SEL will be considered by our Behavior Specialist (Ms. Browning)?	<b>22%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>44%</b>	5%	0%

The questions in Table 4.1 refer to teachers' perceived ability to influence the design and implementation of the SEL program, as well as the likelihood of feeling heard by those in leadership positions. The data conveyed that the majority of teachers felt neutral about their ability to influence the design and implementation of the SEL curriculum. The majority of teachers also felt neutral about the likelihood of their views being heard by administration or by Ms. Browning. Comparatively, teachers felt more confident that their views would be heard by Ms. Browning than by administration.

Table 4.2 Survey Question Responses

Lesson Preparation	A Great Deal	Quite a Bit	Somewhat	Very Little	None / Not at All
5. How confident are you with accessing the instructional materials needed for teaching SEL?	<b>55%</b>	<b>42%</b>	0%	3%	0%
6. How prepared do you feel prior to teaching every new SEL lesson?	<b>25%</b>	<b>50%</b>	17%	8%	0%
7. How much are you able to help other teachers with delivering SEL lessons?	<b>11%</b>	<b>44%</b>	31%	11%	3%

The questions in Table 4.2 refer to teachers' feeling of preparation to access and teach the SEL curriculum. The data conveyed that 97% of teachers either felt quite confident or a great deal of confidence about their ability to teach the lessons. Similarly, 75% of teachers either felt quite prepared or a great deal of preparation prior to teaching the lessons. Teachers felt least capable of helping other teachers with delivering the lessons, although 55% reported feeling a great deal of ability or quite capable.

Table 4.3 Survey Question Responses

SEL Instruction	A Great Deal	Quite a Bit	Somewhat	Very Little	None / Not at All
8. How easy has it been to help your students feel safe to engage in SEL lessons?	<b>25%</b>	<b>39%</b>	25%	8%	3%
9. How easy has it been to enable your students to trust you during SEL lessons?	<b>22%</b>	<b>42%</b>	28%	8%	0%
10. How much can you do to increase students' memory of what they have been taught in previous SEL lessons?	<b>11%</b>	<b>42%</b>	39%	8%	0%

11. How much can you do to get your students participating in discussions during SEL lessons?	<b>22%</b>	<b>42%</b>	33%	3%	0%
12. How much can you do to cause your students to enjoy participating in SEL lessons?	19%	<b>36%</b>	<b>39%</b>	6%	0%
13. How much can you do to help your students complete their SEL assignments?	11%	<b>36%</b>	<b>47%</b>	6%	0%

The questions in Table 4.3 refer to teachers' sense of ease with delivering the SEL instruction to their students and influencing student participation with the curriculum. The data conveyed that 64 % of teachers felt a great deal of ease or quite a bit of ease helping their students feel safe to engage in SEL lessons. Almost the same amount (66%) felt a great deal of ease or quite a bit of ease getting their students to trust them as SEL instructors. Fifty-three percent of teachers felt a great deal of ease or quite a bit of ease helping their students remember what they were learning in SEL, while 64% felt the same way about getting their students to participate in SEL discussions. Teachers felt that it was less easy to compel their students to enjoy SEL or to complete the SEL assignments. Thirty-nine percent of teachers felt neutral about their ability to compel their students to enjoy SEL, while 36% felt a great deal capable. Forty-seven percent of teachers felt neutral about their ability to compel students to complete the SEL assignments, while 36% felt a great deal capable.

Table 4.4 Survey Question Responses

Student Benefits	A Great Deal	Quite a Bit	Somewhat	Very Little	None / Not at All
14. How much can your efforts with SEL help prevent problem behaviors among students at school?	<b>8%</b>	<b>44%</b>	39%	8%	0%
15. How much can your efforts with SEL help you establish relationships with your most difficult students?	<b>22%</b>	<b>44%</b>	22%	11%	0%
16. How much can your efforts with SEL help your students overcome adverse home/community conditions?	3%	30%	<b>55%</b>	11%	0%

The questions in Table 4.4 refer to teachers' perceived ability to employ SEL to help students manage adversity and establish meaningful relationships. The data conveyed that 44% of teachers felt that their efforts with SEL would help their students manage difficult behaviors quite a bit, while 8% felt their efforts would help a great deal. Similarly, 44% of teachers felt that SEL would help them establish meaningful student-teacher relationships quite a bit, while 22% felt their efforts would help a great deal. Fifty-five percent of teachers reported neutral responses regarding their ability to employ SEL to assist students with managing adversity in their home or community, while 33% reported positive responses.

To summarize the teacher efficacy survey results, teachers' responses indicated an above average sense of efficacy in Lesson Preparation, SEL Instruction, and Student Benefits. Teachers indicated a more neutral sense of efficacy in the area of Teacher Influence.

## **Semi-Structured Teacher Interviews**

The semi-structured teacher interviews revealed qualitative data that provided rich descriptions of teacher experiences and perspectives as SEL instructors. These data were coded and organized into themes and sub-themes to answer research question #2 (What are the experiences of teachers implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?)

### ***Mixed Teacher Reactions***

The first theme that emerged from the interview data was teachers' varied reactions to the introduction and implementation of SEL. The most common reaction among teachers was feeling overwhelmed by the many new changes and challenges that accompanied the start of the school year. Teachers consistently expressed feeling overloaded, due to instructional modifications, an overhaul of the district instructional model, and the seemingly haphazard assignments of certain teachers to suddenly become part-time virtual teachers. Teachers used words like "nervous," and "stressed" to describe their outlook upon returning to school. One teacher shared, "A lot of people were very apprehensive about the start of the school year." Introducing SEL in this environment presented an additional challenge to many. Teacher interview data revealed that most teachers were not particularly impressed by the idea of SEL as it was presented, and they categorized it as "something else that we have to do" that was "thrown on us" in addition to the other mandates that emerged this year. A teacher confirmed, "...there was so much going on, that that was like one more thing that a teacher had to say, 'Oh my gosh, now you want me to do this!'" This teacher remarked, "I think that everything was just so crazy at the beginning, that it [introducing SEL] might've been easier if it were just a

regular year.” Despite this distressing start, teachers shared that several weeks of implementing the program enhanced their understanding of its purpose and function. A teacher shared, “Once we started to implement it, that’s when I started to understand what we were doing and why we were doing it. And then I could see the benefits of doing it, so I feel better about it.” This eventual understanding led to less feelings of stress about teaching SEL. According to an Explore teacher, “I think now that they’ve [Academic teachers] gotten into it and have spent time and have seen that it wasn’t to take away from them academically but to assist them, I think [the stress] has lessened a lot.”

### ***Limited Teacher Preparation***

The second theme that emerged from the interview data was teacher’s initial lack of understanding of the curriculum and preparation to teach the content during the first week of school. A teacher shared, “At the start of the year when it was introduced, I wasn’t sure what it was we were expected to do…it was hard for me to get an understanding.” Another teacher said, “At the beginning of the year, what I was originally told…was that it was going to be like an advisory period. It wasn’t really specified on what that was going to look like for a bit.” This difference in understanding was expressed in reflections from SEL team members as well.

While teachers overwhelmingly agreed that the curriculum was packaged and delivered in an effective and efficient manner, they did not initially feel that enough training was offered to prepare them as SEL instructors. They agreed that the training that they received during the summer “train the trainers” sessions were more comprehensive and communicated more details than the one training session provided to our faculty prior to the start of school. One SEL team member said,

I don't think the way SEL was presented to the team over the summer translated when we presented to the teachers - not as well. And I think when we presented it to the rest of the...teachers, depending on who was in the groups, it kind of felt different.

Another SEL team member shared in retrospect that teachers would have benefitted from receiving, "a little bit more preview or more in depth of what [SEL] was and realizing the importance of it to our students." Consequently, many teachers did not fully grasp the purpose of SEL and its essential components. This caused teachers to have early reservations about their roles in its implementation.

Another determinant factor was teachers' varied levels of prior experience with teaching SEL or similar programs. Three out of the nine teachers interviewed shared that they had prior teaching experience with SEL or PBIS in other schools. One teacher with a degree in psychology who was previously trained in PBIS and Second Step shared, "I had already started teaching the kids this kind of stuff before we started doing this...so it kind of worked with what I already started in the classroom anyways." Teachers who taught SEL at other schools or had professional experience with psychology and/or proficiency in student behavior attributed their comfort and familiarity with teaching SEL to this prior experience. Despite these factors, over half of the teachers shared that they felt comfortable teaching the content. Conversely, one teacher shared, "I've got mixed feelings about SEL in general...I have an education degree. I'm not a sociology person...so I'm put in kind of a weird spot because I didn't learn how to do that."

Teachers' varied feelings of preparation were also attributed to how soon they made time to review the new curriculum after receiving it. Those who routinely review



the curriculum on the same day that they taught the content still felt prepared to teach SEL. Some teachers did not open the content until it was time to teach it. When this was their practice, they still delivered the instruction without difficulty. One teacher said, “There are some weeks that I will forget to look at the actual lessons beforehand and so I’m sitting there during lunch quick looking, but for me it just comes so easy.” When teachers forgot to review the content and had to teach it in the moment, those who were able to adapt their instructional approach still felt successful. One Explore teacher noted that on days when she was assigned to substitute an SEL class but could not make the time to review the lesson, she felt “stressed out” and “unprepared” upon entering the classroom. She remarked, “sometimes you don’t get that opportunity [to review the lesson] when you don’t have a class consistently like the core [Academic] teachers do.” Another Explore teacher shared that she had always been able to find time during the day to prepare prior to serving as a substitute SEL teacher.

### ***Conditional Student Engagement***

A third theme that emerged from the teacher interviews was the noted variation in descriptions of students’ engagement in the lessons. The results showed the level of student engagement was dependent upon positive teacher involvement, positive teacher-student relationships, and students’ enjoyment of the lessons.

Positive teacher involvement was demonstrated by teachers actively participating in and guiding the flow of the SEL lesson. In this study, all teacher participants shared that students most often engaged in SEL lessons through discussions fueled by the questions provided in the curriculum. One teacher further described his lesson by saying, “Mainly [our SEL session] looks like a discussion, but it’s not always led by me. So [it’s]

that whole idea of group therapy as long as you're respecting each other." Teachers also attributed their success with student engagement to the content being applicable to real life and their students being willing to discuss personal issues. Teachers with prior SEL experience were most likely to extend or redirect discussions after reading the mood of the group. Every teacher participant indicated that the relationship between the teacher and students was the most important factor in maintaining meaningful dialogue during SEL discussions. An explore teacher shared that "students need to know who you are before they feel comfortable to share."

The interview data confirmed that teachers who openly shared themselves with their students during SEL benefitted from established relationships that fostered student engagement. Another teacher shared about the lesson topics, "I've told them [my students] I've felt the same way and I've had to work through some of these same issues with peer pressure and stuff like that, so they know it's okay to feel that way."

Six out of the nine teacher participants shared that their students generally enjoyed the SEL lessons. Others shared that students had mixed feelings about participating, and they questioned the purpose of the program. One teacher shared that her academically gifted students challenged the delivery of the content. These students were in favor of discussing the topics presented, but they felt that the mode of delivery was too immature for them. Their teacher said, "They're willing to complete the assignments, but they don't enjoy it...I do think they would enjoy it if it were at a higher level." The time of day was identified as a factor that limited student engagement, as SEL was held in the last hour of the day. At that time, students tended to be more tired and less focused as they anticipated being dismissed to go home. A teacher remarked, "It's

not that they will not participate, but it's just that their focus, you know, [they are asking] 'What time is it? Is it time to go home?' You've got one or two of them asking all the time."

To summarize the teacher interview data, teachers had mixed feelings about SEL at the start of the school year, mainly due to the way that it was presented to them. They felt more familiar and confident with the program as they began implementation. Teachers agreed that the curriculum was designed to promote ease of access and presentation; their ability to review the content prior to teaching it varies. Finally, teachers shared mixed feelings about their ability to promote student engagement. Whereas they agree that their involvement in the lesson increases student involvement, in some cases, the mode of content delivery hinders student engagement.

### **Classroom Observations of SEL lessons**

Classroom observations that I conducted in January of 2021 generated qualitative data that provided descriptions of teacher participants teaching SEL. These data were coded and organized into themes and sub-themes to answer research question #2 (What are the experiences of teachers implementing Social and Emotional Learning initiative during a global pandemic?)

#### ***Student Effort Complements Teacher Effort***

The first theme that emerged from this classroom observation data was the fact that students tend to mirror the intention and engagement displayed by their teachers. In classrooms where the teacher demonstrated sincere effort and intent to lead meaningful conversations or fully engage with the activities, the students typically followed suit. In one 7<sup>th</sup> grade lesson, the teacher stood at the front of the class and actively led the student

discussion by asking questions like, “Have you ever been blamed for something that wasn’t your fault?” She allowed for multiple responses, and asked follow-up questions like, “How do you handle a situation like that?” In another observation, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher joined in an activity about priorities by listing her priorities on the board to model her expectations from her students. After having the students write their priorities, she asked them to “Look at yours, and decide which one is first thing, then second, then third.” She demonstrated this on the board as well. The students followed her lead and participated fully in the lesson.

Conversely, when teachers did not appear fully committed to teaching the content (for example, by inserting sarcasm into the lesson), the students were inconsistently engaged. In an 8<sup>th</sup> grade classroom where the teacher read the questions verbatim without extended conversation, the students were reluctant to respond. Asking questions like “What do you feel good about?” garnered student responses such as, “My shoes,” or “Nothing.” In these instances, the teacher responded sarcastically, which compelled students to engage even less in the lesson. The teacher asked, “What are you worried about?” Most students answered, “Nothing.” The teacher then responded, “I’m worried about you staying awake.” Some students rolled their eyes at the teacher, and others made comments in response.

Additionally, teachers who added their own collaborative learning and engagement structures to the lesson were more successful in compelling the students to consistently engage. One 8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher inserted a movement structure where she asked the students to write a response to a question and then stand up when they finished writing. The teacher then asked the students to volunteer what they wrote. Most students

volunteered responses this way. Teachers who met the minimum instructional requirements (for example, reading the content aloud verbatim with no additional teaching strategies included) had students who less frequently engaged in meaningful discussion.

### ***Supplemental Media Should Be Age Appropriate***

A second theme that emerged from the January classroom observations of SEL lessons was the varied student reactions to the videos, books, and activities that accompanied the lessons. Whereas sixth grade students exhibited excitement with the visual components, many 7<sup>th</sup> graders and most 8<sup>th</sup> graders were more reluctant to engage. They groaned loudly or stated that the related media was “for little kids.” One 7<sup>th</sup> grade student further shared that, “This isn’t from our perspective. It’s not even close to what we go through. It’s just dumbed down.” He suggested, “It would better if it was based off of real-life problems or situations. Like...forgetting to do your chores or having the responsibility to take care of your brothers or sisters.” Another student agreed and clarified that the topics of the lesson are usually age-appropriate, but the method of delivery (cartoon videos and children’s books) was beneath their level. Most of the class agreed. They also agreed that the parts of the lesson they most enjoyed the daily emotion check-ins and the “what would you do” scenarios.

To summarize the classroom observations data, SEL lessons were most engaging where the teacher was intentional about engaging with the content. In these cases, the students typically responded with similar engagement. Additionally, authentic student engagement was contingent upon the age-appropriateness of the content being delivered.

## **Document Analysis**

The October classroom observation data were collected by Explore teachers to provide Ms. Browning with insight and ideas for improvement, which guided subsequent discussion among the SEL team. Data from these observations of SEL lessons were deemed artifacts for document analysis. For this study, these artifact data were coded and organized into themes and sub-themes to answer research question #2 (What are the experiences of teachers implementing Social and Emotional Learning initiative during a global pandemic?)

### ***Positive Teacher Involvement Increases Student Engagement***

The first theme that emerged from these classroom observations was the effect of positive teacher involvement on student engagement during the lesson. Positive teacher involvement was exemplified where teachers demonstrated attention and enthusiasm during the lesson. The data described teachers who were positively involved in the lessons as “animated,” “enthusiastic,” “supportive,” and “encouraging.” In cases where teachers deliberately infused their lessons with these behaviors, more students were observed positively engaging with the lesson. This confirms one teacher’s reflection that, “Students tend to find value in the lesson when the teacher appears to find value in the lesson.” Instances where lesson delivery was not successful was often a result of teachers bypassing the SEL lesson and using the allotted time to continue with academic work. In these cases, the lack of teacher involvement eliminated the opportunity for student engagement.

### ***Applying Instructional Strategies Increases Student Engagement***

The second theme that emerged from the October classroom observation data was evidence of teachers applying instructional strategies to enhance the delivery of the lessons. In these instances, teachers elected to employ their own best instructional practices to augment the delivery of the SEL lesson. Whereas the SEL curriculum did not explicitly include the following best practices, teachers intuitively employed modeling, incorporated engagement structures, and provided examples beyond the content to support the lesson. These and other practices were observed in every grade level. In cases where teachers applied these instructional strategies to teach SEL, there was an observed increase in student engagement.

### ***Classroom Environment Impacts Student Engagement***

A third theme that emerged from the classroom observation data was the link between a positive classroom environment and increased student engagement. Several comments indicated that classroom environments that were most conducive to successful delivery of the lesson had optimized student engagement. Recurring terms included “community” and “students feel heard.” These descriptions suggested that students were more willing to participate in SEL when they felt like they belonged and when teachers listened and validated their ideas.

### ***Sixth Grade Was Most Engaged***

The October classroom observation data revealed that students were most frequently engaged in SEL in 6th grade classrooms. Examples of student engagement in 6th grade classrooms included students showing interest in the lessons by volunteering responses, asking questions, and engaging in discussion. This can be attributed to

evidence of more 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers demonstrating enthusiasm, applying instructional strategies, and creating a positive classroom environment, which led to increased student engagement. Instances where students were not engaged in 7<sup>th</sup> grade lessons entailed students putting their heads down, not taking the lesson seriously or focusing on other assignments during SEL. In 8<sup>th</sup> grade, students appeared tired and not interested in the content. In these instances, the teachers either did not engage with the lesson or did not appear committed to teaching it. In cases where 8<sup>th</sup> grade students did engage in the lesson, observation data indicated strong teacher-student relationships and evidence of teachers taking ownership of the lesson delivery.

To summarize this document analysis, students increase their level of engagement when teachers positively engage with the lesson. Teachers also positively impact student engagement when they insert best instructional practices to support the lesson delivery. Finally, students engage with the lesson more often when the classroom promotes a sense of community. These observations revealed that 6<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms demonstrated these themes more often than 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

### **Triangulation of Findings**

In this section, I review the research questions that guide the findings of this study and identify commonalities and discrepancies among the quantitative and qualitative data.

The first research question (How do teachers perceive their sense of efficacy in implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?) was answered through quantitative data gleaned from the teacher efficacy survey. Survey results indicated that because the monthly lessons were pre-packaged with accessible links and



delivered to each teacher weeks in advance of their implementation, teachers felt most capable and empowered to teach SEL in the area of access to the curriculum and instructional preparation. The teacher interview data and classroom observation data were consistent with these results. These findings are consistent with Bandura's assertion that success experiences increase self-efficacy (1997). Teachers successfully teaching SEL due to the curriculum being presented in a pre-packaged, accessible manner is an example of a success experience. Bandura confirmed that once a person has a success experience with a given task, his/her efficacy expectation increases (1997). In other words, the person becomes more confident and more likely to repeat the task. In this study, teachers who experienced early success with effective delivery of the SEL lessons expressed a high sense of efficacy.

In instances where SEL was not being taught upon observation, teachers had decided not to teach SEL at that time for reasons not related to difficulty with preparation. These behaviors were observed during the initial classroom observations conducted by Explore teachers. Data collected during the intervention did not clarify teachers' reasoning for opting not to teach SEL. There were no sample participants who were observed not teaching SEL; hence no opportunities were available for elaboration on reasons why the content was not taught in certain instances.

Survey results indicated that teachers felt least capable of influencing the design and development of the program. Specifically, teachers felt their suggestions or requests for modification of the lesson were least likely to be considered by administration, but more likely to be considered by Ms. Browning. One teacher said of Ms. Browning, "I think...if somebody had a question, she was very open to what to do with it. Anybody

could ask [her] a question.” Data collected from classroom observations neither corroborated nor disputed these claims. However, interview responses indicated that their limited view of teacher influence was partially because teachers were not required to create the SEL content. Another teacher shared,

I don’t feel like we had any influence [with the design] other than we had expressed the need for the whole program [in years past]. It [the introduction of SEL] was kind of like we found this program, here you go...and not necessarily that that’s a bad thing.

Another teacher remarked,

...the lessons are right there. All you’ve got to do is read it and click on the link and you’ve got it, so it’s not anything... [that teachers are] having to make up, or they’re having to do or they’re really having to do a lot of preparation for. It couldn’t be any easier than that.

The second research question (What are the experiences of teachers implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?) was answered through descriptive data gleaned from the teacher interviews and classroom observations of SEL lessons conducted in October of 2020 and January of 2021. Teacher interviews revealed that many staff members were uncertain and/or fearful about returning to school during the COVID-19 pandemic. One teacher reflected, “A lot of people didn’t know about this COVID stuff. We were scared.” This uncertainty contributed to overall feelings of stress and overwhelm as they were presented with new professional challenges.

SEL team members agreed with teachers who claim that SEL was inadequately introduced to the teaching staff at an inopportune time. Neither survey data nor

observation data corroborated these claims, although teachers consistently shared these concerns during semi-structured interviews. Teacher interviews also revealed that their level of comfort teaching the content often correlated to their level of prior experience with social and emotional content. Teachers who had taught for ten or more years, studied psychology, were trained in PBIS, and/or taught SEL prior to this year consistently expressed comfort with teaching SEL. Those who expressed misgivings or discomfort attributed this to their lack of exposure to SEL curricula and other social and emotional content. Neither survey data nor observation data pinpointed the specific reasoning behind these claims.

Regarding student engagement with SEL, teacher interview data indicated that students consistently engaged with the SEL discussions when they actively led them. Classroom observation data strongly indicated that teachers' display of enthusiasm with the lessons promoted student engagement. This elevated participation was most often observed in 6th grade classrooms. These results were consistent with survey data, where the two highest scorers in teacher efficacy were 6th grade teachers. Interview responses from these two teachers were consistently positive about SEL as a school initiative and their level of comfort, preparation, and capability to successfully teach the content. It is worth noting that both teachers had over 25 years of teaching experience. One had prior experience teaching SEL and a background in Psychology, while the other was a special education teacher with a background in instructional modification to meet learning needs. These factors might have directly impacted these teachers' demonstrated levels of high efficacy teaching SEL.

Classroom observations also indicated that when teachers did not consistently teach SEL during the allotted time or did not teach it with fidelity, the students did not take the content seriously. Lapses in participation and/or enthusiasm were observed in 7th and 8th grade classrooms. Seventh grade teachers appeared less willing to teach the content, while 8th grade teachers prioritized academic work over SEL instruction. These data were consistent with survey results, where the two lowest scorers in teacher efficacy were 7th grade teachers. Interview responses from one 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher revealed frustrations related to SEL being a state-mandated initiative and pushback from students who were not receptive to the program delivery. The other 7<sup>th</sup> grade teacher was an Explore teacher who expressed the two-fold challenge of limited time during the day to prepare to teach students with whom she may or may not have strong relationships.

To summarize this triangulation of data analysis, teachers with prior experience that would support teaching SEL were most comfortable implementing the program. Teachers felt most prepared to teach the lessons when they viewed the content beforehand; however, they were not hindered in teaching the lesson when they did not preview it. Finally, teachers who positively engaged with the lessons and infused best instructional practices into the lesson delivery were most able to foster student engagement.

## **Summary**

The aim of the research in this study was to describe teachers' perceived sense of efficacy their related experiences with teaching SEL during a global pandemic. This chapter provided analysis and triangulation of quantitative and qualitative results,

including a quantitative teacher efficacy survey, qualitative classroom observation data and qualitative semi-structured interview responses.

The teacher efficacy survey provided data based on the responses of 36 teachers who participated with SEL as direct classroom teachers, Explore/substitute teachers, and/or SEL team members. These results indicated that teachers felt an above average sense of efficacy with teaching SEL. Classroom observations of SEL lessons provided evidence that supported teacher scores and further illuminated the importance of teacher buy-in to compel student participation. Teacher interviews provided an opportunity for teachers to elaborate on their survey responses and further describe their experiences with teaching SEL. These data indicated that positive teacher perceptions of the SEL program were either established at the onset or developed over time. Bandura's work confirms that as teachers encountered success experiences with teaching SEL, their efficacy expectation increased (1997).

All teachers recognized the needs of our student population and the importance of providing social and emotional support to our students. One teacher remarked, "[Our students have] a lot of baggage. I think [SEL] goes hand-in-hand [with academics]. How do you expect them to perform academically if you don't deal with the baggage?" This reflection directly aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which necessitates attending to basic human needs (hunger, security, belonging) before higher needs can be met (1943, 1954).

In comparison to the teacher efficacy scores reflected in the survey responses, the follow-up interviews described an even higher sense of teacher efficacy in teaching SEL. We can therefore conclude that despite the ongoing negative impacts of the COVID-19

pandemic and the stress and overwhelm that accompanied the start of this school year, our teachers were able to teach SEL in this environment with above average teacher efficacy. Implications related to assessing teacher efficacy among the remaining teaching staff and future recommendations is discussed in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5

### Implications and Recommendations

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the previous four chapters in this study. This overview includes the problem of practice, theoretical framework, research questions, research approach and methodology, and findings. Subsequent sections reveal an action plan based on the findings and a timeline of steps that encompass the action plan. Implications for practice and implications for future research follow. A summary of the study and practitioner reflections end this chapter.

#### **Problem of Practice**

The Spring of 2020 produced far-reaching changes in education, in response to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Cities and countries around the world quarantined their citizens, thus requiring school buildings to close indefinitely. Subsequent consequences suffered by many people during the extended quarantine included the emotional effects of loss, depression, and isolation (Azevedo et al., 2020; Masuda & Strong, 2020; Soma, 2020). In South Carolina, schools were tasked with providing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) to students to mitigate any pandemic-related trauma endured during the school closures and beyond. Teachers returned to school with similar trauma. They were subsequently tasked with adapting to drastic changes in the new year, including the implementation of SEL. Failure to sufficiently support students and teachers through this process would likely result in ongoing trauma among students and a diminishing sense of efficacy among teachers (Azevedo, 2020;

Baron et al., 2020; Horesh & Brown, 2020; Lee, 2020; Soma, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in social cognitive theory and motivational theory. Bandura (1977, 1986) applied social cognitive theory to formulate self-efficacy, a person's belief in his abilities to accomplish desired goals. Maslow (1943, 1954) applied motivational theory to devise his hierarchy of needs, which outlines ordered levels at which humans obtain personal satisfaction. In this study, I describe our teachers' sense of efficacy (teacher efficacy) in implementing SEL, a program that focuses on accommodating the needs of our students, whom the literature confirms have been socially and emotionally impacted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided decisions made regarding this study's research design, data collection methods, and data analysis:

1. How do teachers perceive their sense of efficacy in implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?
2. What are the experiences of teachers implementing Social and Emotional Learning during a global pandemic?

### **Research Approach and Methodology**

This action research study was conducted with a pragmatic research approach, allowing for the most appropriate methods to be employed to answer the research questions posed. As such, a convergent mixed methods design was most appropriate, allowing for both quantitative data and qualitative data to be collected and analyzed in



pursuit of answering the research questions. Quantitative data was collected from a teacher efficacy survey completed by 36 volunteer teachers at WMS. This data was compiled and analyzed using descriptive statistics in order to answer research question #1. Qualitative data was collected from nine semi-structured teacher interviews and two rounds of classroom observations of SEL lessons. This data was organized and coded into themes and sub-themes in order to answer research question #2.

## **Findings**

The findings that emerged from analysis of the survey results, teacher interviews and classroom observations of SEL lessons provided answers to the research questions that guided this study. Survey results indicated that teachers felt an above average sense of efficacy with teaching SEL. Further analysis revealed that they felt most capable and empowered to teach SEL due to the ease of access to the pre-packaged SEL curriculum. Their improved sense of efficacy after engaging with the pre-packaged curriculum aligns with Bandura's claim that mastery experiences increase self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Survey results also indicated that teachers felt least capable of influencing the design and development of the program. Teacher interview responses shed further light to confirm this claim. Perhaps teachers' lower sense of efficacy in this regard was due to their belief that sharing their views (social persuasion) with administration would not influence the program design. While Bandura (1986) wrote that social persuasion is a positive reinforcer to produce desired outcomes, its absence would produce the opposite. Hence the absence of social persuasion between teachers and administration fostered a lower sense of efficacy among teachers.

Teacher interviews revealed that staff members were uncertain and/or fearful about returning to school during the COVID-19 pandemic. The introduction of SEL during this time was an added stressor. Teachers and SEL team members agreed that SEL was inadequately introduced to the faculty prior to the start of the school year. Teachers also revealed that their level of comfort with teaching SEL often correlated to their level of prior experience with social and emotional content. These findings provide another example of teachers benefitting from prior mastery experiences that increase their sense of efficacy with teaching SEL (Bandura, 1986).

Classroom observation and teacher interview results indicated that teachers were most able to foster student engagement when they actively participated with the students and led meaningful discussions. This data strongly indicated that teachers' display of enthusiasm with the lessons promoted student engagement. This elevated participation was most often observed in 6th grade classrooms. Teachers' improved sense of efficacy due to modeling positive engagement is aligned with Bandura's claim that modeling or emulating desired behaviors and achieving desired results compels a person to repeat the behavior for the same desired outcome (Bandura, 1986). Classroom observations also indicated that when teachers did not consistently teach SEL during the allotted time or did not teach it with fidelity, the students did not take the content seriously. These findings reflect a correlation to Bandura's claim when the opposite is true: When teachers did not model the positive engagement with lesson, the students did not positively engage. Teacher efficacy would be consequently diminished. Additional findings showed that whereas all teachers recognized that SEL would attend to the needs of our student population, some teachers and students took issue with the maturity level of the content

presentation. This data provided evidence that further illuminated the importance of teacher buy-in to compel student participation.

### **Action Plan**

This section provides a plan of clearly defined steps that are outlined to address the findings in this study. The purpose of this plan is to define actionable steps that will be taken to improve next year's implementation of SEL. A justification for each step is also provided.

#### ***Provide Comprehensive Training***

A consistently shared concern among teachers was the limited training that they received in preparation for teaching SEL this year. SEL team members agreed that while their summer training allowed for a more in-depth understanding of why we were implementing SEL and how the program would be implemented at WMS, the same depth of training was not provided for classroom teachers. After the SEL team members engage in summer "train the trainer" sessions, we will implement a series of in-depth training sessions for classroom teachers, to begin during the week prior to the first day of school. These sessions will be placed on the calendar throughout the first quarter of the school year, where specific content will be provided to classroom teachers to further educate and prepare them to teach SEL.

#### ***Expand the SEL Curriculum***

Feedback provided from teachers and students indicated areas where the content should be further differentiated to identify developmental needs and interests by grade level. Whereas the current curriculum focused on topics that were most appropriate for middle school student needs, the media content drew most interest from 6<sup>th</sup> graders and least from 8<sup>th</sup> graders. During the summer prior to the next school year, we will augment

the current curriculum to include more age-appropriate media to address the curriculum topics. Teachers have also shared additional SEL content extracted from instructional applications provided by the district. We will examine these applications and consider them for additional content to incorporate into next year's curriculum. Providing for more age-appropriate content and making use of teacher-suggested resources will promote buy-in from teachers and students.

### ***Conduct Quarterly Observations of SEL lessons***

Each round of classroom observations of SEL lessons provided rich, descriptive data that further informed this ongoing intervention. Conducting the observations also reinforced to classroom teachers our expectations of content delivery on a daily basis. For these reasons, we will conduct classroom observations on a quarterly basis. This will provide for four rounds of observations over the course of the year, instead of two. The cyclical nature of this action research study will be served by these additional opportunities to collect and analyze data to further inform ongoing implementation.

### ***Solicit Teacher Feedback***

Teachers who submitted survey responses and participated in the semi-structured interviews provided useful feedback to provide teacher input that informed our practice. Teachers were not provided with many opportunities to provide this type of feedback. This intervention took a cyclical approach in the Ms. Browning's monthly transmission of new lessons for teachers to deliver during SEL. In order to optimize the quality of the lessons, we will provide the opportunity for teachers to offer pedagogical feedback after they teach the content. This will be executed monthly, allowing teacher feedback to inform the design and development of subsequent lessons in the months to come. Data

collected through teacher feedback will include one grade level per month, to allow for a more targeted approach in modifying curriculum in each grade level. We will collect 8<sup>th</sup> grade feedback in September and employ teacher input to modify the 8<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum for October. We will then collect 7<sup>th</sup> grade feedback in October and employ teacher input to modify the 7<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum for November. Each month, we will apply this process to the next grade level. Providing this opportunity will promote teacher buy-in, as their input will be continually considered to inform ongoing program implementation.

### ***Solicit Student Feedback***

Classroom observations of SEL lessons revealed insightful students who readily shared constructive thoughts and opinions regarding the SEL program. Their feedback about the content presentation was informative and useful. In order to maximize student interest and engagement in the SEL lessons, we will provide the opportunity for students to offer ongoing feedback from the lessons. This will be done on a monthly rotation, allowing student feedback to swiftly influence the discussion topics and the modes of content delivery selected. Data collected through student feedback will include one grade level per month, to allow for a more targeted approach in modifying curriculum in each grade level. We will collect 8<sup>th</sup> grade feedback in September and employ student input to modify the 8<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum for October. We will then collect 7<sup>th</sup> grade feedback in October and employ student input to modify the 7<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum for November. Each month, we will apply this process to the next grade level. Including student feedback will promote student engagement, as the lessons become more tailored to their

interests and they perceive a personal stake in the content through their feedback provided.

A timeline of action steps is provided in Table 5.1 that chronicles the procedures to be taken moving forward.

Table 5.1 Timeline of Action Steps

Date	Activity
July 2021	Ms. Browning will meet with administration to brainstorm suggestions and ideas for SEL implementation in the new school year. These ideas will include teacher and student feedback provided throughout the previous school year. Administration will also assist with selecting new SEL team members.
August 2021	<p>Ms. Browning and I will meet to discuss, review, and finalize the structure and direction of the SEL curriculum and implementation in the new school year.</p> <p>Ms. Browning and I will meet with the SEL team to introduce the new SEL curriculum and to prepare the team to train the faculty. The series of training sessions will be prepared for the team and for the faculty in order to better equip each group to deliver SEL instruction.</p> <p>Teacher First Days (prior to student first day): SEL team members will provide a series of more in-depth SEL training for classroom teachers.</p>
September 2021	<p>First quarter classroom observations of SEL lessons completed.</p> <p>8<sup>th</sup> grade teacher and student feedback submitted via Google Forms.</p>
October 2021	7 <sup>th</sup> grade teacher and student feedback submitted via Google Forms.
November 2021	Second quarter classroom observations of SEL lessons completed.

	6 <sup>th</sup> grade teacher and student feedback submitted via Google Forms.
December 2021	8 <sup>th</sup> grade teacher and student feedback submitted via Google Forms.
January 2022	Third quarter classroom observations of SEL lessons completed.  7 <sup>th</sup> grade teacher and student feedback submitted via Google Forms.
February 2022	6 <sup>th</sup> grade teacher and student feedback submitted via Google Forms.
March 2022	Fourth quarter classroom observations of SEL lessons completed.  8 <sup>th</sup> grade teacher and student feedback submitted via Google Forms.
April 2022	7 <sup>th</sup> grade teacher and student feedback submitted via Google Forms.
May 2022	6 <sup>th</sup> grade teacher and student feedback submitted via Google Forms.

These findings are essential to the ongoing improvement and development of our SEL program, as we intend to continue with implementation next year. Through this action plan, efforts to increase buy-in and engagement among teachers and students will benefit both groups. Teacher efficacy in implementing SEL will improve, with long-term effects of a sense of connection and community within the classroom and the school. Students will also benefit from the support afforded them through improving the SEL program. Evidence shows that their long-term effects include improved social and emotional health, improved academic performance, and greater socio-economic prospects for a successful adult life.

## **Implications for Practice**

Based on the findings of this study, a conclusion can be drawn that WMS teachers were able to navigate SEL instruction during this school year. Multiple factors hindered their effectiveness (for example, limited training, limited preparation, limited teacher commitment, external stressors), but teacher participants still reported an above average sense of efficacy in teaching SEL. The following implications are suggested to improve our practices in implementing SEL.

### ***Implement Teacher SEL***

A compelling suggestion that presented itself in the early stages of the intervention was to conduct an SEL program designed to support to social and emotional well-being of our teachers. Our initial training sessions with teachers illuminated their levels of stress and frustration, accompanied by remarks that indicated their interest in receiving social and emotional support alongside the students. Whereas Ms. Browning leads teacher check-ins during weekly teacher meetings, we do not have a curriculum or structured program to parallel the support that is currently being provided for students. I believe the development and implementation of a comprehensive Teacher SEL program would be profoundly impactful among our staff.

### ***Solicit Instructional Content***

To increase student engagement, the curriculum provided to deliver SEL instruction must be conducive to students' interests and developmental levels. We can improve our practices by asking teachers to provide sources for additional material that can be taught during SEL. Classroom teachers are most familiar with the instructional needs and interests of their students. Providing an opportunity for teachers to offer



additional sources of SEL content to be included in the curriculum would serve two aims: It would ensure that students find the content more interesting and appropriate, and it would influence more teachers to positively involve themselves in the delivery of a curriculum that they helped design.

### **Implications for Further Research**

The ongoing implementation of this study allowed for recurring opportunities for future research considerations. These considerations were recorded in the field notes that I maintained during this study.

#### ***Research Teacher SEL***

To support the afore-mentioned implication to implement an SEL program designed to support to social and emotional well-being of our teachers, it would be additionally beneficial to conduct a research study to inform this implementation. In this proposed study, teachers would provide feedback regarding their perceived efficacy while receiving support through a program designed to promote their social and emotional well-being.

#### ***Add Student Participants***

An initial consideration during the design of this study was the inclusion of student participants who could reflect on their experiences with SEL and provide feedback through surveys and interviews. Whereas this study allowed for teachers to provide input to inform the program development, a study that allows students to do the same would be beneficial. During this study, students were motivated to share their thoughts and opinions about SEL. Their open feedback further piqued my interest in their perspectives as recipients of the instruction. To address this interest, I have offered a

means of collecting monthly student feedback as a next in this study's action plan.

Conducting a study that implements SEL with a focus on student efficacy would further inform our practice.

### ***Expand to Other Schools***

Whereas SEL was a state mandate that was implemented in every school in Spain County, I am interested in how other Spain County schools implemented SEL programs in their buildings. In order to compare and contrast the effectiveness of SEL in schools across the district, further research could be conducted to provide opportunities for schools to share their experiences. Since we are a middle school, a future study could focus on the experiences of the 13 Spain County middle schools. Alternatively, a study that focuses on the schools in our local cluster (five elementary schools, two middle schools, one high school) would provide insight into the experiences in the schools of the students whom we serve.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided a recount of the steps taken to conduct this study, including the problem of practice, research approach and design, theoretical framework, methodology, and data findings. An action plan was then introduced to address the findings presented in the study. The action plan consisted of definitive steps to take in order to improve future implementation of the SEL program at WMS. To accompany the action plan, a timeline of future activities was provided to indicate when and how often each step should occur. Finally, implications for this intervention and implications for further research were shared.

As a practitioner-researcher, my interest in furthering the development of our current SEL program has inspired my consideration new research pursuits. It has also influenced my approach as an administrator with collecting and analyzing data to inform current implementation in other areas at WMS. I foresee utilizing a similar action research approach when analyzing student performance data, identifying student learning needs, considering possibilities for intervention, and supporting teachers with academic instruction to improve student performance outcomes.

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## Appendix A

### Teacher Efficacy Survey Instrument

This questionnaire is designed to help us gain a better understanding of our teachers' sense of self-efficacy in teaching SEL within the current schoolwide model.

Please indicate your opinions about each of the statements below by selecting the corresponding choices. Your answers will be kept confidential within the use of this research study.

**1. How much can you influence the decisions that are made regarding the implementation of the SEL at our school?**

1 (none)      2 (very little)      3 (somewhat)      4 (quite a bit)      5 (a great deal)

**2. How much can you influence the decisions that are made regarding the design of the SEL curriculum?**

1 (none)      2 (very little)      3 (somewhat)      4 (quite a bit)      5 (a great deal)

**3. How much can you freely express your views to the administration regarding the implementation of SEL at our school?**

1 (none)      2 (very little)      3 (somewhat)      4 (quite a bit)      5 (a great deal)

**4. How much can you freely express your views to the behavior specialist regarding SEL at our school?**

1 (none)      2 (very little)      3 (somewhat)      4 (quite a bit)      5 (a great deal)

**5. How much can you do to enhance collaboration between teachers and the administration to make the SEL initiative run more effectively?**

1 (nothing)      2 (very little)      3 (some)      4 (quite a bit)      5 (a great deal)

**6. How much can you do to access the instructional materials and equipment you need for SEL?**

1 (nothing)      2 (very little)      3 (some)      4 (quite a bit)      5 (a great deal)



**7. How much can you do to access the instructional materials and equipment you need for SEL?**

1 (nothing)                      2 (very little)                      3 (some)                      4 (quite a bit)                      5 (a great deal)

**8. How prepared do you feel prior to teaching each SEL lesson?**

1 (not at all)                      2 (very little)                      3 (somewhat)                      4 (quite a bit)                      5 (a great deal)

**9. How much can you help other teachers with delivering SEL lessons?**

1 (nothing)                      2 (very little)                      3 (some)                      4 (quite a bit)                      5 (a great deal)

**10. How much can you do to make students feel safe to engage in SEL lessons?**

1 (nothing)                      2 (very little)                      3 (some)                      4 (quite a bit)                      5 (a great deal)

**11. How much can you do to get your students to trust you during SEL lessons?**

1 (nothing)                      2 (very little)                      3 (some)                      4 (quite a bit)                      5 (a great deal)

**12. How much can you do to increase students' memory of what they have been taught in previous SEL lessons?**

1 (nothing)                      2 (very little)                      3 (some)                      4 (quite a bit)                      5 (a great deal)

**13. How much can you do to get your students talking during the SEL lessons?**

1 (nothing)                      2 (very little)                      3 (some)                      4 (quite a bit)                      5 (a great deal)

**14. How much can you do to compel students to enjoy participating in SEL lessons?**

1 (nothing)                      2 (very little)                      3 (some)                      4 (quite a bit)                      5 (a great deal)

**15. How much can you do to help your students complete the SEL assignments?**

1 (nothing)                      2 (very little)                      3 (some)                      4 (quite a bit)                      5 (a great deal)

**16. How much can you use SEL content to help prevent problem behavior at school?**

1 (none)                      2 (very little)                      3 (some)                      4 (quite a bit)                      5 (a great deal)

**17. How much can you use SEL to establish relationships with your most difficult students?**

1 (not at all)                      2 (very little)                      3 (some)                      4 (quite a bit)                      5 (a great deal)

**18. How much can you do to overcome the influence of adverse home/community conditions on students' social-emotional well-being?**

1 (nothing)                      2 (very little)                      3 (some)                      4 (quite a bit)                      5 (a great deal)

**19. Would you be willing to participate in an intervention that would monitor and assess teacher efficacy toward implementing our SEL initiative?**

Yes, absolutely                      No, not interested                      Maybe - give me more details

**20. Are you a member of the SEL Core Team?**

Yes      No

## Appendix B

### Teacher Interview Protocol

1. Describe your initial understanding of the purpose of SEL when it was introduced at the start of the year. How has your understanding has changed over time?
2. Describe your feeling of comfort and preparation to teach SEL each week.
3. Describe how you and your students typically engaged with the SEL lessons.
4. Describe how you and your students typically engaged with the SEL assignments.
5. Let's review your survey responses where you selected "A Great Deal." Please expound upon those responses.
6. Let's review your survey responses where you selected "Nothing" or "Not at all." Please expound upon those responses.
7. How has SEL been a benefit for students and staff this year?
8. How SEL has been a drawback for students and staff this year?
9. Do you think the effects of the COVID pandemic has had an impact on our teachers' sense of efficacy in implementing SEL? Please explain.
10. If you had the opportunity to improve the quality of our SEL initiative, what would be your approach?

## Appendix C

### Classroom Observation Protocol

1/25/20

TEACHER ENGAGED Ms. K was listing her 3 daily priorities as an example.

TEACHER QUESTION Ms. L asked students if they knew what a priority was.

STUDENT RESPONSE Student attempted to respond, was correct.

TEACHER DISCUSSION Ms. K. confirmed student and further explained what a priority is.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY Ms. L. asked students to write down their 3 priorities and stand up when they're done....then walked around to check..

FULL INVOLVEMENT All but 2 stood...then all but 1...then everyone stood.

STRATEGY Stretch it out, reach for the ceiling and reach for the floor. Have a seat.

TEACHER LED We're going to take our list of 3, and we're going to put them in prioritizing order.

TEACHER ENGAGED Ms. L. demonstrated how she does hers.

Look at yours, and decide which one is first thing, then second, then third.

TEACHER ENGAGED Ms. L. walked around to chat with students about what they wrote.

TEACHER ENGAGED Ms. K. explained her priority list too.

NEED MORE STUDENTS|ENGAGED Teachers are talking to each other more than the students are talking. They're participating, but not talking.

Figure C.1 Classroom Observation Protocol

## Appendix D

### Classroom Observation Template (Artifact)

#### **SEL LESSON OBSERVATION TEMPLATE**

Please provide responses to the following questions to reflect your observation of the SEL lesson being taught.

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

Observer: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

What are 3 things that you have noticed?

1)

2)

3)

What are 2 things that you are left wondering?

1)

2)

What is one thing that you suggest?

1)